CORONET

Stuart Jackman

A TERRIFYING STORY OF DESERT WARFARE IN WORLD WAR II

SAND CATCHER

They rested for half an hour and then pushed on. Finch took over the driving. The sand was firm on the floor of the trough and they made good progress. After the aching glare of the salt the softer colours of the sand dunes soothed their eyes. Blade felt the return of hope and began to feel better. His head was clearer now, the shooting pains in his neck less vicious. But the fingers of his left hand were beginning to swell and he found he could no longer close his fist. He told himself it didn't matter. They were over the worst and every mile brought them nearer to Orange. He listened to the steady thrumming of the tyres on the sand and relaxed.

But it was too good to last.

Sandcatcher

Stuart Jackman

CORONET BOOKS
Hodder and Stoughton

Copyright © 1980 by Stuart Jackman

First published in Great Britain 1980
by Hamish Hamilton Ltd

Coronet edition 1982

British Library C.I.P.

Jackman, Stuart
Sandcatcher. – (Coronet books)
I. Title
823'.914[F] PR6019.A18

ISBN 0–340–27919–2

The characters and situations in this book are entirely imaginary and bear no relation to any real person or actual happening

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which this is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Printed and bound in Great Britain for Hodder and Stoughton Paperbacks, a division of Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., Mill Road, Dunton Green, Sevenoaks, Kent (Editorial Office: 47 Bedford Square, London, WC1 3DP) by Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk

For Morag, with love

The end of man is an action, and not a
thought, though it were the noblest.

Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*

HQ No. 5 D.P.G. 22 DECEMBER, 1944

Lockyer found him.

Station Warrant Officer Arthur Lockyer; a thickset, by-the-book regular with a lot of service in. He was Duty Officer that night. Three days before Christmas and cold, the surface of the desert brittle with frost. He was making his rounds at 04.00 hours when he saw the body hooked up on the wire behind the petrol dump, wrapped in cloth and corded. Like a mummy.

Lockyer's face set hard. He switched off his torch and walked down to the Guard Tent by the main gate. Finch, the Duty Sergeant, was sitting in a camp-chair reading. He looked up and saw Lockyer's eyes bleak in the yellow light of the hurricane lamp. 'Trouble?' he said quietly.

Lockyer nodded. Finch put down his book and stood up, short and workmanlike in a quilted jeep jacket worn over freshly-laundered khaki overalls. He jerked his head towards the off-duty guards sleeping behind him, raising his eyebrows in an unspoken question.

'No,' Lockyer said. 'Just the two of us, Chaff.'

They went out together, got the body down, carried it across the sand to the Sick Bay and laid it on a trestle table. Finch worked his shoulders. 'God, he's bloody heavy.'

Lockyer smiled grimly. He knew why; had seen it all before. 'Get the C.O. in here, jildi,' he said. 'Doc Gold, too.'

Finch looked at his watch. 'Now?'

'Haven't you gone yet?' Lockyer said.

Wing Commander O. T. D. Rhys-Smith DSO, Officer Commanding No. 5 Desert Patrol Group, was a red-headed, small-boned, press-on type who had collected his gong and a glass eye flying Hurricanes in the Battle of Britain. He was in his early thirties, but his lined face made him look much older. Among themselves, and with affection, his young patrol officers called him Father.

He came into the Sick Bay wearing a battledress blouse and pyjama trousers tucked into his desert boots. 'Morning, Mr Lockyer. I hear our sunburned friends have sent us a Christmas present.' He walked over to the table and looked down at the swaddled corpse. 'Gift-wrapped, too, I see.' The cold anger in his good eye belied the casual, almost callous words. 'OK. Let's see what they've sent us, shall we? No point in waiting till 25 December.'

Lockyer opened his knife and sliced through the cords round the body. The cloth wrappings were stained and filthy. He cut down through them from the top of the head to the upper rib cage, pulled the cloth away and exposed the bearded face. The bile rose hot and sour in his throat. The face was swollen, bruised almost black. The eyes were sunk deep in the head, the nostrils clogged with dried blood. The nose had been broken and the lower jaw shattered. The mouth hung open like a gaping wound torn and split at the corners. There was no tongue.

'Bastards,' Rhys-Smith said and swallowed hard. The corpse was fly-blown, the stench appalling.

'Thank God,' Lockyer said, saw the C.O's glare and added quickly, 'I thought it was going to be Mitchell.'

'Mitchell?' Rhys-Smith shook his head. 'No, it's not Mitchell. Probably some poor devil from Transport Command flying a clapped-out Dakota on the Karachi run. Pancakes in the blue with a duff engine. Climbs out in one piece and gets clobbered. Better signal HQME. Find out if there's an aircraft overdue.'

Lockyer said doubtfully, 'I think we'd have heard before

this, sir. He didn't grow that beard overnight. My guess is he's at least a month adrift. Maybe longer.'

'So who the hell is he?' Rhys-Smith said.

Gold came in with Finch. Gold was the M.O.; forty-one, slight, dedicated, with a narrow Jewish face, brown eyes and short black hair going grey. 'Morning, gentlemen. What's all this about a . . . . ?' He broke off, staring at the corpse. 'Good God, what a mess.'

'Women's work,' Rhys-Smith said bitterly. 'Those damned Bedu bitches have been at him.' He moved to one side. 'Take over, will you, Doc.'

Gold pulled on rubber gloves, took a pair of surgical scissors from a tray and began to cut down further through the wrappings. The soiled cloth parted easily, the rotting flesh beneath rising up through the opening.

'Bloody hell,' Finch said softly as the smell hit him.

The abdomen was laid bare now, hugely distended below the rib cage, a great mottled bag of putrefying flesh spreading down over the thighs, flaccid, heavy. Gold palpated it carefully. They all heard the hard grating sound. 'Good God,' Gold said again. 'What a way to die.'

Rhys-Smith said, 'How long's he been dead, d'you reckon?'

Gold shrugged. 'Three days. Four. I'll need to do a P.M. to be certain.'

'It doesn't make sense,' Finch said as if to himself. 'It just doesn't bloody add up.'

Rhys-Smith looked at him sharply. 'What's that, sar'nt?'

'You know who he is, sir?'

'No. Do you?'

'Oh, yes,' Finch said. 'I know who he is. And he died four months ago. Not four days. Four bloody months. Back in the summer at the end of August.'

I

Sheik Yasi Ahmed bin Hafid, father of the Mabkhaut Bedu, died at sunset on 3 August, 1944, impaled on a stake outside the charred ruin of his tent in the Wadi Dugri. Around him in the ravaged oasis the bodies of his people lay butchered on the sand, wrapped in living shrouds of black flies. He had been on the stake since noon; six hours of excruciating agony during which he had seen his wives stripped and raped, each one many times, on a bloodied blanket spread on the ground in front of him. Bin Hafid was not a young man, but strong, and his dying was hard.

Abu Marak sat on his camel in the fading light with his rifle across his thighs and watched bin Hafid die. Behind him, mounted and ready to ride, his wolf pack waited in silence, sated with killing, the pouches of their tasselled saddle-cloths stuffed with loot. Big, lean men, they were, straggle-bearded, hard-eyed, with the high cheek-bones and the great hooked nose of the Bedu. They wore white, ankle-length robes, streaked now with blood, and carried the tools of their trade: rifles, shotguns, knives and curved, two-edged swords thrust through the bandoliers round their waists. Eyes slitted against the setting sun, crawling with lice and flies, they sat like hawks in the saddle, the fingers of their left hands hooked into the reins, and waited for Marak to give the word to move out.

In the hierarchy of the southern Bedu, Marak was nobody, a nothing. Wanted for murder in the coastal town of Mirbat,

he had escaped across the Qarra mountains into the terrible country of the Bait Kathir and travelled west along the Uruq al Zaza, past the brackish wells of the Bait Imani into Saar territory. There he had found what he was looking for; a tribe weakened by dissension and internal quarrels, in revolt against an ageing sheik. He joined the rebels, sharpened their resolve with a careful blend of flattery and insult, and murdered his way into power. When the killing was over he welded the survivors into a small, ruthless fighting force – the Maaruf Saar, the wolves of the desert. From their base at the Manwakh wells on the southern edge of the Empty Quarter, he led them in a series of terrorist raids, a campaign of increasing savagery and daring against the scattered tribes of the Hadramaut – the Manahil, the Awamir, the Dahn, the Rashid – culminating in the attack on the Mabkhaut in the Wadi Dugri.

The Mabkhaut numbered some eight hundred people. A powerful tribe, important and by Bedu standards rich. With their defeat the Maaruf came into their own, controlling a huge crescent of desert country from the Jebel Doan in the east, through Najran, north to Sulaiyil. A vast, empty kingdom of sun and salt and flies; and Marak its king.

At five-past six in the evening bin Hafid gave a great, strangled cry, threw out his arms as in a gesture of welcome to a long-delayed friend – and died. The Maaruf lifted their heads and echoed his death-cry in a wolf howl of triumph. And when he was dead, Marak leaned down from his saddle, spat in his face and left him to the jackals.

2

The briefing for CATCHER was held in the Ops Room at 21.00 hours on 17 August, two weeks to the day after bin Hafid's death. The Ops Room was starkly functional: an old EPI tent erected over a shallow pit dug into the sand behind the Officers Mess in No. 5 DPG's headquarters at Zubair on the Shat el Arab. Lit by a two hundred watt light bulb suspended over the map table it was hot and stuffy, acrid with the smell of stale cigarette smoke and fly spray.

Present at the briefing were Rhys-Smith; Maitland, a major from Military Intelligence, GHQ/ME, Cairo; and Flight Lieutenant J. M. Blade, designated OC CATCHER.

CATCHER was the code name of a four-man commando unit specially created for a single, one-off operation. Its mission: to locate and capture Marak. Alive.

'Alive,' Maitland said. 'That's imperative. He'll be hanged eventually, of course. But not by us. We'll get him up in front of the Court of Sheiks in Riyadh. Let them deal with him. Under our supervision, naturally.'

'Naturally,' Rhys-Smith said. He disliked staff officers from Cairo who dropped in with neat, cut-and dried schemes that looked good on paper but exposed his crews to appalling risks.

Maitland nodded, unruffled. He was accustomed to being disliked. Expected it, even. 'First,' he said, 'we want to talk to him. Find out what the hell he's playing at down there.'

'I can tell you that now,' Rhys-Smith said testily. 'He's building a bloody little empire.'

'Oh, quite.' Maitland's smile was bland, rather patronising. 'But for whom?' He wiped the sweat off his face with an astonishingly clean white handkerchief. A tall, thin man, precise of speech, scholarly, with soft hands and deceptively mild eyes. A Shepheard's Hotel warrior, smooth, devious, unacquainted with the desert.

Rhys-Smith glared at him, turning his head to look him full in the face, the way he had learned to do to keep his fixed glass eye parallel with his good one. 'For himself, of course. Who else?'

'That,' Maitland said primly, 'is what we need to know.'

'Damn it, man. Why make a mystery of it? The little bastard's setting himself up as King of the Hadramaut. It's as simple as that.'

'Is it?'

'Look, Major. Marak's rubbish. A jumped-up little back-street wog swanning round in the blue with a bunch of ragged-arsed cut-throats. He's on the make. OK. They all are. It happens all the time down there on the edge of the Empty Quarter. The Bedu are like that. Tribal warfare's their way of life. They've damn all else to do but dodge round in the wadis knocking hell out of each other to establish the right to draw water at some stinking cess-pit of a well you wouldn't let a rat drink out of.'

Maitland nodded calmly. 'So I'm informed. But this time it could be different. More serious. A dummy run for the real thing. Perhaps the start of the real thing itself.'

Rhys-Smith said warily, 'Are you by any chance talking about a jihad?'

'A holy war?' Maitland shrugged. 'It's a possibility.'

It was always a possibility. The attack on the RAF depot at Habbaniya in 1941 had proved that. The Bedu tribes, urged on by the promise of German support, had banded together in an uneasy alliance and made an abortive attempt to break the

British grip on the Gulf and the oil pipeline to the Mediterranean. It was after that the Desert Patrol Group had been formed to probe the empty country between the Gulf and the Yemeni mountains, control the activities of men like Marak and provide an early-warning system of any new moves to create a united Arab Front threatening the Canal in the west, the oil fields in the east.

'The timing's right,' Maitland said. 'Spot on, in fact. We've got our hands full now in Europe. Stretched to the limit there. Not to mention Burma and the Far East.' He looked mildly at Rhys-Smith. 'Been up in the Canal Zone lately, have you?'

Rhys-Smith shook his head.

'It's not like it was in '42,' Maitland said. 'Our chaps are pretty thin on the ground there now. Just off the boat too, most of 'em. Inexperienced. Not a lot to do. Bad for morale, I'm afraid.' He shook his head. 'Could be dicey. The Middle East is there for the taking. Wide open to any Muslim fanatic who has a sense of destiny and feels the urge to chance his arm.'

Rhys-Smith grunted. 'Not Marak.'

'I agree. Marak has neither the prestige nor the muscle. Yet.' Maitland paused, a cautious man, schooled in reticence. 'There may, however, be somebody behind him who has both and is waiting in the wings to take over. Somebody who needed bin Hafid out of the way because he refused to co-operate.' His face was serious, a touch of iron beginning to show through the blandness. 'I hope you're right about it being just a bit of local tribal nonsense. Because if it isn't – if it's the opening gambit in a much bigger game . . .' He let the words hang like a question mark above the map table. After a moment he said, 'Only one way to find out.' He turned to Blade who was standing beside the Wing Commander. 'Speed is of the essence. Speed and secrecy. I want the answers out of Marak before whoever is backing him knows he's been snatched. So please, no heroics. Show the flag if you have to,

but don't for God's sake wave it in their faces. Just get down there, grab Marak and bring him in. Alive.'

Blade nodded. 'Roger, sir.'

Maitland looked at him thoughtfully, his eyes suddenly shrewd, assessing what they saw. Blade was twenty-three, desert-thin, desert-hard. Grounded two years previously by a perforated ear drum, he had come to the DPG from a heavy bomber squadron to command George patrol. In spite of the network of lines cut deeply into the corners of his eyes, his face was still young, almost boyish; an undergraduate's face, intelligent, assured, curiously vulnerable. But his hair was already beginning to grey at the temples and there was about him a honed-down authority not usually seen in students. He spoke fluent Arabic and regarded the Bedu with wary respect; especially men like bin Hafid whom he had liked and cautiously trusted.

He met Maitland's gaze steadily. He was sceptical of the jihad theory but wise enough not to show it. For him CATCHER was a personal thing, uncomplicated by politics; simply an instrument of justice with which to nail bin Hafid's murderer. That and nothing more.

Maitland said, not unkindly, 'How d'you rate your chances?'

'Of finding Marak? Excellent. We'll run him down within the week. Of getting him back here in one piece? Fair to good.'

'Anything else we can do to up-rate that to a straight good?'

Blade shook his head. 'I don't think so, sir.'

'Happy with your crew?'

Blade hesitated fractionally. 'Yes, sir.'

The hesitation, brief as it was, did not go unnoticed. 'Sure?'

'Yes.'

Maitland nodded. 'Good show.' Spoken in that precise scholarly voice, the worn RAF cliché as incongruous as the

red-tabbed uniform draped loosely round Maitland's stoop-shouldered frame.

Blade moved tactfully round the end of the table. Rhys-Smith was unhappy with people who talked to him on his blind side. Facing him now, Blade said, 'If you'll excuse me, sir? I've one or two things to see to.'

'Right, Jack. I think we've covered everything. Major?'

'Yes, thank you.'

Rhys-Smith nodded. 'Orange will be on back-up in the Zilfi area five days from now. Call 'em up if things get sticky. Standard operational frequency.' He grinned. 'As if you needed telling. OK. Off you go. I'll see you in the morning before you leave.'

Maitland held out his hand. 'I won't. So good luck.' His smile was suddenly genuine and warm, without patronage. Before the war he had probably been a very pleasant man.

Blade shook hands with him, saluted and walked out of the tent.

Maitland said quietly. 'He seems a little young to be . . .'

'Doing our dirty work?' Rhys-Smith said 'our' but he meant 'your'.

'Yes.'

'That's what the young men are for, isn't it, Major?' Rhys-Smith said. 'We dream up the schemes. They cope with the nightmares.'

Rhys-Smith saw them off at first light the next morning, standing by the main gate of the base. Behind him a big, white-painted board carried a row of wooden crosses hung on hooks. Written across the top of the board in bold, black letters were the words: IF PROCEEDING SOUTH PLEASE TAKE ONE. It was a kind of good luck charm, the equivalent of the skier's BREAK A LEG. Blade wondered what Maitland had made of it.

They turned west on to Z track, heading for the Halfway House, travelling fast on the firm, hard packed sand. Blade

drove the fifteen-hundredweight with Sergeant Race beside him. Finch and Hooper were behind in the three-tonner.

Apart from its oversize sand tyres and strengthened suspension the three-tonner was standard: a bulky, high-standing supply truck loaded with petrol, ammunition, water, rations and spares. Two rolls of steel-meshed track were stowed forward of the sun-bleached canvas tilt, spades and picks strapped to the metal sides. In the cab, clipped into racks behind the bucket seats, were two Lee Enfield .303 rifles, a couple of sten guns and a webbing haversack stuffed with grenades.

The fifteen-hundredweight was a fighting vehicle, stripped down and extensively modified. The whole of the superstructure – cab, tilt framing, tail-gate – had been sliced off to leave a flat, low-sided steel deck behind the two jeep-type seats. Water and petrol were stored in two long, torpedo-shaped cylinders built in under the deck. Fitted above them were specially designed ammunition feed lockers to take the belts for the twin Browning machine guns trained fore and aft on a swivel mount bolted to the deck. On the dashboard a custom-built, hooded fascia housed a double row of instrument dials including a tachometer, oil and water temperature gauges and a large, luminous electric clock calibrated as an aid to navigation. There was a compass bracketed to the steering column and between the seats, behind the stubby gear shift, an aircraft-type radio receiver. With its big V12 engine, four-wheel-drive transmission and huge balloon tyres the truck was a fast, go-anywhere gun platform.

The Halfway House was neither a house nor halfway to anywhere in particular. Just a cairn of stones at the eastern end of the Wadi Emek, a hundred and three miles out from the base. The patrols used it as a map reference, plotting their outward courses from it, homing in on it on the way back to Zubair. CATCHER stopped there for breakfast at seven. The sun was well up, a light wind blowing down the wadi holding the shade temperature in the mid-seventies. They

parked the trucks at right-angles to each other to make a lee, set up the pressure stove and cooked tinned sausages and bacon, with fried bread and a dixie of tea. As always, the food tasted good in the thin morning air, the tea steaming wine-dark and fragrant. They squatted on the sand, eating with their fingers, each man using one hand to cover his mug of tea and keep out the flies. Cutlery they never used in the desert; it needed washing and there was no water for washing. Only for drinking. And to top up the radiators.

They wore the scruffy, comfortable uniform of their trade: faded khaki overalls, the trouser bottoms tucked into suede ankle boots, khaki handkerchieves knotted loosely round their necks, cap comforters pulled down over their ears. The brass buckles of their unblancoed webbing belts were green and dull, reflecting no tell-tale gleam of sunlight. Their webbing holsters were frayed where they had hacked off the flaps to leave free the heavy service revolvers. They wore no badges of rank. Rank was irrelevant beyond the Halfway House. Now they were a family, brothers together, interdependent, integrated, each one with a contribution to make, each one of equal value.

Already, after only a hundred miles, they were dirty. The fine grey dust of the track had powdered their faces, clinging thickly to their eyebrows, clotted in the sweat on their foreheads and noses. It gave them a grotesque family likeness, as if they were indeed brothers.

'Drop more chai, Skip?' Finch held out a dirt-ingrained hand for Blade's mug and refilled it from the dixie. Corporal 'Chaff' Finch, five feet six and a half, compact, cheerful, with mouse-brown hair and mouse-brown eyes and a talent to survive nurtured on the streets of Whitechapel, proved in the pitiless heat of the Empty Quarter. Kind-hearted, generous Finch who carried a creased snapshot of his infant daughter (whom he had never seen) in the breast pocket of his overalls and would break his last cigarette in two and give you the bigger half. Finch the quick-as-a-whip corner boy who had

exchanged his navy-blue, double-breasted suit and white silk scarf for a pair of overalls and desert boots. Who wore a knife day and night, the way other men wore a watch, strapped snugly under his left forearm, the hilt nudging the heel of his hand. Tough, easy, dangerous Finch.

Beside him, Hooper took a mouthful of tea, spat out a drowned fly, belched and grinned. Hooper was from Manchester and a giant; thick-thighed, slab-shouldered, his head a cropped cannonball. Well over six feet, amiable as a Disney bear, he could lift the spare wheel of the three-tonner above his head with one hand and drop it neatly in over the high tailboard in a single, fluid movement. Firing a Lee Enfield, Bedu-style, from the hip he could puncture a tin of bully or kill a man at sixty-five yards. Every time.

Sitting with his shoulders against the nearside rear wheel of the fifteen-hundredweight, Tom Race scooped up a handful of gritty sand, soaked it in the dregs of his tea and began to scrub out his mess tin. Blade watched him covertly. This was the man who had caused that moment of hesitation Maitland had been quick to spot at the briefing. He wasn't sure of Race. The other two were from his own patrol, handpicked for this operation. Race was from Apple. The odd man out. The x factor in CATCHER's human equation. Blade had not wanted him; had wanted, instead, his own sergeant, Jim Harris. But two days previously Harris had been posted; an unexpected, Most Immediate posting to Almaza, just outside Heliopolis in Egypt. Only Race had been available on the base to take his place in CATCHER.

Race was something of an enigma. He had been in the desert only five months, posted in to the DPG about the time that Marak was mounting his first raid with the Maaruf Saar from the Manwakh wells. According to his records, Race was an armourer who had been up at Gambut in the Sollum sector of the Western Desert, working with a Beaufighter squadron, one of the last operational squadrons flying shipping strikes in the eastern Mediterranean. Five months was not long. But

he had done three patrols with Apple and acquitted himself well.

'He's a bit of a loner, Jack,' Alex Squires, the CO of Apple had said. 'But by God he's mustard on those bloody Brownings.'

Which was, of course, what mattered. But there was something about him – a wariness, a kind of resentment – Blade found disturbing. It was partly the man's looks; a hint of foreign blood in his deeply-tanned face, the nose a little too sharp, the cheek bones a touch too narrow. His hair was black, glossy, brushed back from his forehead in a widow's peak, curling a little behind his ears below the cap comforter. He had a good chin and jawline, and his eyes were large, intelligent, black as his hair. Like a gipsy's, Blade decided. There was something of the gipsy in his voice, too. A thin, harsh, metal-on-metal voice with just a suggestion of a whine in it.

Blade frowned over his tea. A man was what he was and had to be accepted as such. If he came good when the chips were down, the fact that he had an irritating voice and the bold, sly eyes of a poacher was not important. What was important – and disquieting – was the tension in Race. A spiky, brittle edginess that separated him from the others. A damn-your-eyes arrogance that could destroy their closely-meshed unity like sand in a gearbox.

OK, so he's not Harris, Blade thought. You can't blame him for that. Give him a chance – a couple of days hard driving to get used to us – and he'll do. If Alex Squires says he's good value, he's good value.

It was a sensible, reassuring thought. He just wished he found it more convincing.

Hooper stood up and unstrapped a spade off the three-tonner. 'OK to take a walk, Skip?'

Finch grinned. 'Warm the seat for me, Hoop.'

'Five minutes,' Blade said.

Hooper and Finch went off down the wadi together. Race,

taking another spade, walked pointedly in the opposite direction. Modesty? Or yet more evidence of that include-me-out self-sufficiency? Blade wasn't sure. He lit a cigarette and sat smoking for a minute or two, not exactly worried, just a little uneasy. And it was too early in the piece for that.

He stood up, reached into the front of the fifteen-hundredweight, opened the line back to base and radioed in his first sitrep. NTR – nothing to report.

There were no tracks beyond the Halfway House. They navigated by map and compass, crossing the red sandstone wastes of the Nefud, a golden river of powdered rock that took them down between Zilfi and Tuwaim, west of Riyadh, east of Harik, to camp for the night in the Wadi Birk. They ate an enormous meal of thick stew topped with a layer of dried potatoes, followed by the last of their bread spread with tinned jam. Bread went dry in a matter of hours in that climate. Tomorrow they would be on biscuits. They slept on the sand, wrapped in their blankets against the night cold, one of them always awake and on guard. The next morning they were up early, by-passing Jabrin to turn east-south-east, entering the Empty Quarter an hour before noon.

It was like travelling back through time, beyond the beginning of history, before the rivers were born, before there were trees or grass, before there was hope. The land lay in a great circle about them like a petrified ocean, utterly desolate, hammered lifeless by the sun, silent, empty. They were conscious of the curve of the earth's surface and of the trucks crawling precariously over it.

Listening to the deep growl of the engine, the hypnotic susurration of the tyres on the sand, Blade felt himself beginning to drift, floating out of his body over the weir of memory. He heard again the sing-song voice of the story-teller in the black tent of Yasi bin Hafid, smelled the acrid reek of the oil lamps, saw in his mind the old sheik's face lined with the years, open as a child's, as the familiar words were chanted ....

'Know, then, O Father of the Mabkhaut, that in the beginning the world was a tortoise, its hard, curved shell the desert.' This was the ancient, pre-Islamic myth of Creation; the old Bedu religion that drew its imagery from the strange, burnt-out world of the desert. 'Even then, O Sheik, the tortoise was doomed. It swam in the vastness of the heavens with fire in its belly, destroying its flesh, boiling away its blood, eating it alive. The flames licked up round the edge of its shell and it trailed a long plume of smoke as a running camel trails a plume of sand.'

'Aywah,' the men of the Mabkhaut murmured. 'Is it not so?'

'It is said that there came a great serpent, its eyes white and terrible like the light of the sun on the salt. The serpent circled the tortoise, watching its agony. Round and round it coiled, its cold skin pricking in the heat of the flames. Then it reared up, opened its mouth and spewed vomit on to the shell of the tortoise. Green, slimy vomit that frizzled and bubbled on the hot shell and ran together in separate gobbets. So, O Sheik, were the oases made.

'And behold, in the green slime which dripped from the serpent's jaws there appeared black specks, wriggling and squirming in the terrible heat. And the black specks in the serpent's vomit – ' the story-teller raised his hands, palms upwards, in a gesture of astonishment – 'what were these but Bedu?'

Driving automatically, like a sleep-walker at the wheel, Blade stared out across the sand. Far to the south the mountains of the Hadramaut stood up grey-white against the sky, seen in sharp detail through the lens of the mirage. Was there, he wondered, a deep race memory among the Bedu of those same mountains being born in smoke and flame? Of lakes that boiled dry to leave only the glittering desolation of the salt flats?

The story of the serpent god whose creative cruelty made man for suffering had been overlaid by the teaching of the

Prophet, as the mindless anger of the Hebrew god who had drowned the world in a great flood had been overlaid by the merciful teaching of Christ. But to travellers in the Empty Quarter it was still a vivid, believable allegory of the volcanic birth of the life the Bedu knew and lived.

'Thou art a great Sheik, O Yasi bin Hafid. In all the Hadramaut there is none like thee in wisdom and potency.' The story-teller was old, his eyes like black mirrors reflecting his secret thoughts, his voice lined with the velvet of memory. Old and privileged to sit cross-legged in the tent of the sheik and speak what other men dared not even think. 'The words of thy mouth are like jewels. Thy thoughts cluster in thy mind like diamonds in a mine. Thou fillest the bellies of thy wives with sons and princes spring from thy loins. Swift upon the desert are thy camels, thy sheep fat-tailed and succulent, the milk of thy goats sweeter than the mouths of women. Thou art our Father and we thy children and our lives are in thy hand.' He paused, waiting for the inevitable response of the faithful, the murmured: 'Is it not so?' Then his head came up, his shoulders straightened, his eyes were suddenly brilliant. His right arm stretched out like the branch of a tree, his fingers pointing unwaveringly at bin Hafid. 'But remember this, ya Sidi –' the voice strong now, commanding, sweeping over their heads like a khamsin. 'Remember this. Thou art also only a man. And what is man but a speck of life in the vomit of God?'

The wheel kicked under Blade's hands as they drove across a mile-wide scree of small stones, the detritus of some ancient, long-vanished river. His mind snapped back into the present – the sun, the sweat, the smell of hot oil, the crunching of stones under the tyres. The sediment of regret for the death of bin Hafid settled at the bottom of his mind leaving it clear and cool, iced with hatred for the man who had killed the old sheik. The man for whom they were searching now across the burned-out shell of the tortoise.

For three days they map-read their way through the wilderness of sand and stone and salt, driving deeper into the Empty Quarter, from well to well, oasis to lonely oasis. Each one told them the same story of arson and murder; a story sketched brutally in the fired tents, the glitter of spent cartridges, the human bones scattered by the jackals' feasting or piled in little white heaps round the stakes on which the bodies had been impaled. Most of the water in the wells was undrinkable, polluted by sand and excrement. In one of them the headless body of a child floated half-submerged, the flies feeding on the bloated flesh.

They saw nobody alive in those three days. Yet they were aware of being continuously watched. Of men hidden among the rocks of the wadis or lying prone in the shimmering heat along the crests of the dunes, waiting like vultures for the trucks to falter, blow a tyre perhaps or run a bearing. On two nights they stood to in the black, cold hour before dawn, eyes staring into the darkness, skins crawling with nerves, hearing the soft slurring of camel pads stealthy as the beat of a sleeper's heart. When the sun rose they saw the fresh tracks circling their bivouac. But the camels and the men who rode them through the night – these they never saw. Until the afternoon of the fourth day.

3

The fourth day began badly.

They were far south now, three hundred miles east of Jauf, driving west along the foot of the escarpment. The cliffs of the Uruq al Zaza rose steeply on their left, folded vertically like huge sheets of grey linen. On their right the salt flats stretched away to the horizon, blinding-white, icing-sugar-white in the blaze of the sun. Between the cliffs and the salt was a strip of stony desert like a shingle beach about a mile wide. Most of the stones were small; pebbles ground down and rounded by the blowing sand, lying loose on the surface. But there were occasional outcrops of rock waiting to lacerate the tyres, buckle a track rod. They drove slowly, the fifteen-hundredweight leading, feeling the way for the more vulnerable three-tonner. The heat was appalling, beating down on them with an almost physical force, striking up from the metal bodies of the trucks now too hot to touch. They sat in the canvas bucket seats, bruised by the continual jolting, slathered in sweat which saturated their overalls and chafed the skin of their backs and thighs, driven half-mad by the flies.

A couple of times Blade took the fifteen-hundredweight down to the edge of the salt, testing its stippled surface cautiously. But the crust was paper-thin, cracking under the heel of his boot, exposing the treacherous softness beneath. Fifty yards out it was smooth and hard like concrete. But there was no way they could get the trucks that far on to the

salt without bogging down. They had no option but to stay on the shingle and sweat it out until the slope of the escarpment eased and they could work their way up on to high ground.

Just before nine in the morning, when they had been driving nearly three hours, they ran off the stones on to a stretch of sand. The relief was astonishing and immediate, like lifting an aircraft off an unmade runway into the air. The lurching motion of the trucks changed instantly to a smooth, easy glide. Blade relaxed behind the wheel of the fifteen hundredweight, letting the speed build up. The engine note rose steadily like the return of hope. The rush of warm air swept away the flies, dried the sweat on his face. He sneezed luxuriously, clearing the sand from his nostrils. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the blunt nose of the three-tonner edge into view on his right as Hooper pulled it clear of the long plume of sand trailing behind the fifteen-hundredweight. He glanced at the speedometer and saw the needle quivering on fifty.

They covered eight miles in the next ten minutes and looked set for at least another ten of easy riding. The sand stretched ahead of them, smooth and firm, the colour of cement. But it was too good to last. Topping a slight rise two miles further on, Blade saw the grey sand darkening, saw the tell-tale streaks of reddish brown rushing to meet them, pulling them into a great soft patch of ochre. He braked sharply, flinging up his right hand stiff-armed to warn Hooper. The trucks stopped on the edge of the ochre patch. Finch got down from the three-tonner and joined Blade. They walked on together for about a hundred yards. The sand was fine-grained and slippery. The soles of their boots squeaked warningly as they walked. Finch squatted and began to dig with his hands. He got down to relatively firm sand after about eighteen inches. They went on further, dug another hole, got the same result. A quarter of a mile ahead of them now the colour of the sand changed back to grey.

'You'll make it, Skip,' Finch said. 'Just. But we're going to have to use the tracks for the big gharry.'

Blade nodded, not wanting to accept it, knowing it had to be.

Finch said, 'Chai up first? Or when we get across?'

'When we get across.'

'Could be a long job, Skip.'

Blade licked his dry lips. 'When we get across.' The sun was racing up the brazen curve of the sky. The longer they waited, the hotter it would be.

They walked back to the trucks. Hooper already had the steel-meshed track off the three-tonner. Race was helping him to unroll it.

Hooper looked up, blinking the sweat out of his eyes. 'How far, Skip?'

'Eight hundred yards, give or take fifty.'

Hooper grinned, his head wreathed in flies. 'Not far if you say it quick.'

Race said, 'Is it bad?'

'Piece of cake,' Finch said. 'Lovely stuff. Brighton Town Council'd pay fifty quid a ton for sand like that.'

Blade said, 'OK, let's have a crack at it. Tom, you take the fifteen-hundredweight through first. Give us a couple of channels to lay the tracks in.'

'Straight ones,' Finch said.

Race climbed in behind the wheel and started the engine.

'Take it easy,' Blade said. 'Keep the revs up when you hit the soft stuff. OK?'

Race nodded and eased the clutch in gently. They stood and watched him drive away in first gear, saw the truck hesitate and wallow a little as the front tyres sank into the loose surface, heard the howl of the engine as he built up the revs. The fifteen-hundredweight snaked, skidded, wagging its tail at them, the sand spurting up from under the spinning tyres. The rear end dipped sharply.

'Easy, mate, for God's sake,' Finch said between his teeth. 'Don't go digging no bloody graves.'

Blade blew out his breath in relief as the wheels gripped. The truck steadied and began to move forward at a cautious five miles an hour.

'Right,' Blade said. 'Chaff, you drive the first leg.' He helped Hooper to lift the track and drape it over the bonnet of the three-tonner and they walked alongside, holding it in place, as Finch drove slowly up to the edge of the soft sand and lined the wheels up neatly with the channels Race had made. He stopped the truck there and Blade and Hooper laid the track – two parallel strips, each fourteen feet long. The meshed steel was hard to handle, heavy, hot to the touch. The sweat poured out of them, streaking the dust caked on their faces, running down their backs and stomachs and thighs under their overalls. They stood up, the flies buzzing in black clouds round their heads, and saw the fifteen-hundredweight pull up on the firm sand on the far side of the patch. Race got out, picked up his sten gun and began to walk back towards them.

Blade looked up at the cliffs towering above them, slate-grey in the full morning light. He turned and looked along the beach the way they had come. They were vulnerable now, the trucks separated from each other. But they would be even more vulnerable once the three-tonner was on the tracks. He looked westwards beyond the fifteen-hundredweight, standing with his back to the salt. No point in looking north. Nothing could live on the salt.

Race came up to him, wading ankle-deep in the sand. 'Seems OK,' he said. He was sweating hard, his overalls blotched with great dark patches under his arms, on his chest, across his back.

Blade nodded. 'I'll do the first leg with Hoop. I want you up there in among those rocks.' He pointed to the foot of the cliff.

'Right,' Race said.

Blade looked at him. 'Get as high as you can and keep your eyes open. If they come, they'll come down the beach.' It was standard procedure in this sort of situation; something he would not have had to spell out to Harris. He saw the anger in Race's eyes and knew he had insulted him. He thumped the side of the three-tonner, annoyed with himself. 'OK, Chaff. Let's have you, then.'

Finch drove carefully on to the tracks. The flexible steel sagged under the weight of the truck, the soft sand oozing up through the mesh. But the tyres gripped and the truck edged slowly forward in four-wheel-drive. Hooper put his thumbs up and grinned through the sweat.

They had laid the left-hand track a couple of feet in advance of the right, staggering it so that when the offside rear wheel had cleared the right-hand track the nearside wheel was still firmly based on the other. They lifted the right-hand track out of its channel, dragged it past the truck and re-laid it in front of the offside front wheel. Finch drove on to it and stopped. They then dragged the left-hand track round and laid it in front of the nearside wheel. It was slow, back-breaking work. Lay the track. Drive on. Drive off. Lay the track again. The truck became their god and they its slaves, labouring to serve it under the whip of the sun, floundering in the slippery, clinging sand in a nightmare of sweat and flies. The sand filled their boots. The steel mesh blistered their hands. The flies crawled on their necks and faces, clustering at the corners of their eyes and mouths.

It took them an hour to get halfway across. Blade leaned against the side of the truck, running with sweat, gasping for breath. Even Hooper looked tired, his great chest heaving, the sweat pearling the black stubble on his head.

Finch got out of the cab and grinned at him. 'Glad you joined, mate?'

'Get some bloody track-laying hours in,' Hooper said without rancour.

Blade walked up the beach and climbed the rock-fall to

where Race was keeping watch. He took the sten from the sergeant, too blown to speak, his hands shaking in reaction from the heavy track. Race went down to the truck. Hooper got into the cab. Race and Finch picked up a length of track, dragged it round and laid it in the channel. Hooper let in the clutch. The truck inched forward.

Blade wiped the sweat out of his eyes with a khaki handkerchief gritty with sand. East and west the beach lay empty. The glitter of sunlight off the salt attacked him like knives. The hot metal of the sten magazine stung his blistered hands. The sand in his boots packed tightly round his toes. Below him Race and Finch toiled like ants round the truck. Watching them, he felt like one of the old Pharaohs summoned from his palace by the cool waters of the Nile to stand in the sun and watch the slaves drag the Sphinx into position. Cheops, was it? Or one of the Rameses? Or perhaps Menephtah? The names turned slowly in his mind, suspended on the threads of schoolboy memory like mobiles of half-learned, half-forgotten history. He was beginning to drift again, his mind disengaging from his body, refusing to communicate the complicated pattern of signals transmitted by his senses. He felt the familiar, light-headed ennui; the mental mirage which was the insidious, morale-sapping curse of the desert, lethal as the urge to sleep which attacked travellers in the Arctic. His brain seized on the image, showing him the truck now as a tent on a snowfield, the men beside it busy with sledges. But there ought to be dogs. If those lengths of metal they were manhandling down there were sledges, there had to be dogs to pull them. Where were the dogs? Where were . . . ?

His finger curled round the trigger of the sten, his thumb working the safety-catch off and on. He closed his eyes, fighting the mist in his brain, concentrating fiercely on what his fingers were telling him. He gripped the magazine of the gun hard, welcoming the pain from the blisters on his palm, using it to scour away the mirages. He opened his eyes to the

jagged glare of the sun and looked down. The truck was just a truck, real, familiar. He looked away, reassured. East and west there was nothing.

Half an hour later they changed again. Race driving now, Finch on guard with the sten, Hooper and Blade on the tracks. There were only about a hundred and fifty yards to go but it took them nearly fifty minutes. They were bushed, flaked out, exhausted. Zombies now, not men. Eyes red-raw from the salty sweat, muscles jumping, heads bursting. The flies clung to them like aphids on a rose tree. Their feet floundered in the sucking, sliding sand. They stumbled and fell and willed themselves to stand up again. Somehow, clumsy with weariness, out on their feet, they kept going. Lay the track. Wave the truck on. Stop it. Lift the track. Drag it forward. Lay it in the channel. Wave the truck . . . .

When the front wheels of the three-tonner bit into the hard sand Race yelled, 'Stand back, I've got her.'

Hooper and Blade staggered clear. Race revved the engine and the truck heaved itself out of the soft patch and accelerated smoothly away to stop beside the fifteen-hundredweight. Blade and Hooper collapsed and lay heaving and gasping, retching up phlegm viscous with sand. They were smothered in a thick coating of ochre mud made of sand and sweat, more like drowned logs than men. But they had done it. They were over the soft patch.

Finch came leaping down from the rocks waving the sten and cheering. They sat up and looked at him with tired smiles and began to scrub themselves clean with grubby towels. Race broke out the pressure stove and brewed up.

They half-lay against the side of the fifteen-hundredweight, backs to the salt, eyes watching the beach, gulping the hot, sweet tea, eating handfuls of dried dates and hunks of tinned cheese and hard, square biscuits spread with semi-liquid tinned margarine. They revived quickly with the astonishing resilience of young men, laughing and talking together, shar-

ing the food as they had shared the terrible labour with the truck, joking about it now, cutting it down to size.

Except Race.

He sat silent and self-contained, a little apart from the other three, separated, on his own. During the past six days he had grown progressively more withdrawn; morose and at the same time edgy. A grain of sand lodged under the smooth shell of CATCHER, producing not a pearl but an ulcer. He had rebuffed all their efforts to draw him into the group, answering questions curtly, making no contribution to the conversation. He was efficient, highly-organised and bloody-minded. A misfit. Blade had hoped that the struggle to get the three-tonner over the soft sand patch might have broken down his reserve, made him at last one of them. But it hadn't. He had done his share willingly enough. Sweated as hard as any of them. But he seemed now as unmoved by the experience as he had been by the prospect of getting the truck through.

Watching him uneasily, Blade was worried. The sergeant's sullen arrogance was like an infection. An infection that could spread, throw Finch off-balance, undermine even Hooper's easy-going good nature. And if that happened, when the real crunch came they would be in trouble. Big trouble. Going into the watchful hostility of a Bedu encampment as a team, united, sure of each other, tied together by the invisible threads of trust – this was dangerous enough. Going into it divided was like cutting your own throat.

They swilled the dregs of tea out of their mugs, climbed into the trucks and drove on. By three in the afternoon they had worked their way up a narrow wadi on to the high ground. Up there, away from the salt, the air was cleaner, its movement creating the illusion of freshness. They stopped for a smoke, gave the trucks a quick check, inspected the mechanism of the Brownings under the canvas covers and pressed on westwards. Half an hour later they saw the oasis.

They saw it first as a mirage suspended in the air; a

shimmering, wavering image of palm trees and black tents and blue water wells. Blade braked and looked at the map Race held spread across his knees. The oasis was not marked.

'So,' Blade said. 'That's where he's holed-up.'

Race grunted. His face was a grey mask of sweat-soaked dust from which his goggles protruded like the eyes of a deep-water fish. 'Could be,' he said grudging, graceless as ever.

'It has to be, damn it,' Blade said irritably. 'We've looked everywhere else.'

Finch came across from the three-tonner. 'The Promised Land,' he said cheerfully. 'Milk and honey for supper. What d'you reckon, Skip? Twenty miles?'

'Bull,' Race said, his voice abrasive with contempt. 'It's not more than twelve. If that.'

Finch spat dust out of his mouth. He was incredibly dirty, small in his overalls like an ash-grey gnome. 'I wasn't asking you, mate,' he said.

'Well I'm bloody telling you, Finch,' Race snapped. 'That bloody oasis is a damn sight nearer than you think.'

'I'll tell you what I think.' Finch's voice was dangerously pleasant. 'I think you want to take them goggles off and give your bloody eyes a chance.'

Blade felt Race stiffen in the seat beside him, saw his hands close into fists on the open map. 'All right, Chaff,' Blade said, keeping his voice level, taking the strain as he had had to do too many times since they had left the Halfway House. 'That's enough.'

Finch scowled, watching Race, his mouth clamped tight. 'I didn't come over on the last bloody boat, y'know. Not like some bods.' His voice was no longer pleasant. Just dangerous. 'I have seen a bloody mirage before.'

'You could've fooled me,' Race said. 'Twenty miles my arse. You must be bloody cross-eyed.'

Blade hardened his voice. 'I said, that's enough.' He saw Finch settle his boots firmly on the sand, knees bent a little in the knife-fighter's classic stance. Saw the quick jerk of his

left wrist which slid the hilt of the knife down into his palm.

'Grow up, mate,' Finch said. 'This isn't Apple patrol. You're out with the men this trip not the bloody boys.'

'Men? You?' Race sneered, the caked dust cracking round his mouth as his lip curled back. 'Bloody girl-guides, more like. Chasing your own arses all over this bloody desert looking for a bunch of scabby little wogs armed with pea-shooters. That's not men's work, laddie. You should've been with us up the blue, arming the Beaus on the forward air-strips with the Jerry eighty-eights strafing the guts out of you. That's what I call men's . . . .'

Blade said harshly, 'What the hell d'you think you're on? Arguing the toss like a couple of NAAFI cowboys. Twelve miles – twenty. What the hell does it matter? Marak's sitting there waiting for us. That's what matters. That and damn all else. Right?' He glared at Race. 'Sar'nt Race?'

'Sir,' Race said, staring through his goggles at the mirage, not turning his head.

'Corporal Finch?'

Finch spat again, pushing his luck to the last half-inch, the fingers of his left hand curled up, caressing the hilt of his knife.

'Well, Corporal?' Blade said.

Finch looked up, saw the warning in Blade's eyes, shook his head and grinned tightly. 'Right, Skip. Sorry.'

'So I should hope,' Blade said. 'We haven't come all this way just to play silly buggers, for God's sake.'

Finch said, 'I hear you, Skip.'

'OK,' Blade said. He waited for Race to say something. Race didn't.

After a moment Finch said, 'Usual drill when we get there, Skip?'

Blade nodded. 'I want you at the wheel, Chaff.'

'And Hoop on the sten. Roger.' Finch hesitated, grinned innocently and said, 'You'll be giving Sergeant Race the gen,

Skip?' His emphasis on 'Sergeant' was a masterly bit of insolence. 'Him not being used to our little ways, like.'

Blade looked at him for a moment. 'I'll tell you what I will be doing,' he said, keeping it light with just a touch of iron. 'Any more of your lip and I'll be putting you on a fizzer when we get back.'

Finch met his eyes and nodded, relaxed now. He slid the knife back up into its sheath under his left forearm. 'I'll get weaving then, Skip,' he said and turned and walked back to the three-tonner.

Blade started the engine of the fifteen-hundredweight. As they pulled away he said, 'That wasn't very clever, Tom.'

'Sir,' Race said. Clipped. Correct. Unyielding.

'In fact, it was damned stupid.'

Race said nothing, sitting stiff-backed in the bucket seat, remote behind his goggles.

'I don't want a repeat performance,' Blade said. 'Understood?'

'Sir.'

Blade gripped the wheel hard, holding on to his temper, conscious of Race's bitter non-co-operation like a wall between them. Damn the man, he thought. He doesn't try. He doesn't even bloody try.

Gradually the mirage changed, shrinking into a green vertical line which sagged, lost its shape, found it again for a moment and vanished. They covered another nine miles and there, suddenly, was the oasis, steady, sharp, for real. Blade checked the mileage and made one more attempt. 'Good guess, Tom.' He felt he owed the man that.

'It wasn't a guess, sir,' Race said coldly.

For God's sweet sake, Blade thought. Not now. Not when we're committed.

Race folded the map, slotted it into its case on the back of his seat and pulled the sten gun out of its clips under the dashboard. He fitted a new magazine, smacking it home with the heel of his hand, set the gun for automatic fire, checked

the safety catch was on and sat with it across his thighs, the muzzle pointing away from Blade. He did it all smoothly, matter-of-factly, without having to be told. Which, Blade thought, was something. And he took a little comfort from it. Efficiency was no substitute for that delicate closed circuit of hypersensitive mutual awareness upon which they would have to rely so heavily in the next few hours. But it was, he supposed, better than nothing.

They came in down wind and the stench met them a mile out. The familiar, foetid stink of goat and camel, Bedu cooking, fly-blown sheep and human excrement. It was a comment on the arid, barren miles behind them that they almost welcomed it.

Marak was expecting them, of course. His scouts had made sure of that – the silent, unseen riders in the night, invisible strands in a primitive but highly effective network of intelligence that griddled the empty desert. He had packed off the women and children into the tents which crouched like wounded, black-winged birds under the date palms. He stood waiting on the edge of the oasis in a haze of flies, watching CATCHER's dust pennant streaming out behind the trucks as they raced in towards him. His wolf pack stood bunched at his back, bare-footed in their long white robes, burnouses tied on their heads with black woollen cords. Eighty men, Blade guessed. Maybe more. Each with his full bandolier belted round his waist. Each with his rifle tucked under his right armpit, his hand on the hilt of the knife thrust unsheathed through his belt.

A hundred yards short of the waiting men Blade circled his hand above his head and pointed right. As he swung the fifteen-hundredweight hard right, Finch bore left in the three-tonner. They raced round the perimeter, the trucks bucking in the loose sand, raising ragged curtains of dust. Race twisted sideways in his seat, searching the trees, the sten cradled in his arms. Hooper was standing in the three-tonner with his head and shoulders through the roof hatch, his fists balled

round two grenades. On the far side they skidded to a halt five yards apart, the trucks facing outwards. It was all quick and smooth and practised. Come in fast, make a circuit, park ready to get out again. That way, with luck, you survived.

The curtains of dust swirled and eddied in the noisesome air, drifting back over the trees away from the trucks. Which gave them a few vital seconds. Blade saw Finch dive out of the cab, run round behind the three-tonner, loosen the back flap and haul himself up and in. Hooper was already flat on his stomach on the canvas tilt, his sten cocked and ready. Race whipped the covers off the twin Brownings, freed the locking-catch and swung the guns round. Blade dropped down onto the sand, reached into the wooden box behind the bucket seat and slipped a grenade into the thigh pocket of his overalls. He pulled off his goggles and took his officer's peaked cap from under the seat, knocked the sand out of it and put it on. He picked up the sten Race had loaded for him and walked round to the back of the truck as Marak and his wolves came jog-trotting towards them through the trees.

They formed up in an arc with Marak in the centre front. It seemed to Blade there were more of them now. Quite a lot more. They had probably been joined by others previously stationed in hiding in the trees.

Marak was holding the flap of his burnous across his mouth and nose, his eyes half-closed against the drifting dust. He was small for a Bedu, not more than five-nine, but heavy in the shoulders and arms.

Blade unbuckled his webbing belt and holster with his left hand and put them on the deck of the fifteen-hundredweight, doing it slowly, making a production of it. 'OK, Tom?' he said quietly.

Race's face was taut, his hands locked over the butts of the Brownings. He had pushed his goggles up on to his forehead. His eyes were big white circles in his dirty face. 'Ready, Skip,' he said. It was the first time he had called Blade that.

Blade looked up at him. 'Any trouble, put a burst over their

heads. Finch'll take care of Marak.' He glanced across at Hooper. The big man grinned and put up his thumb. Blade could just see the fore-sight of Finch's rifle poking out through the back flap of the truck, aimed at Marak's right knee. A man with a broken leg could still talk. That was the theory; logical, neat. But entirely academic. If things went wrong in the next few minutes and the shooting started, there was no way in which they would get themselves out alive, let alone Marak. 'Here we go, then,' he said.

He began to walk across the sand, easily, not hurrying, the sten gun held loosely by its sling at his side. It was, as always, like being back at school, walking out to the wicket from the pavilion, mouth dry, bat dangling. Last man in and five to get. In the silence the sand crunched loudly under his boots. What was it Maitland had said? 'Show the flag, but don't wave it.' But Maitland was back in Cairo. Having tea at Groppi's probably. Brushed and bathed. In a clean shirt. Safe.

He stopped a few feet in front of Marak and a little to one side, giving Finch a clear field of fire. They didn't know about Finch. Hooper they could see, as they were meant to do. And Race on the Brownings. But they didn't know about Finch lying there inside the three-tonner taking first pressure on the trigger of the Lee Enfield, Marak's knee as big as a football in his sights.

Slowly, carefully, Blade slipped his left arm through the sling of the sten and slid it over his shoulder. He stood himself at ease and slipped his hands casually into the thigh pockets of his overalls. The fingers of his right hand closed gratefully over the grenade.

'Salaam aleikum,' he said and continued in Arabic. 'I bring thee greetings from Wing Commander Rhys-Smith.'

Marak let the flap of his burnous fall. 'Ismeet? Who is this Ismeet?'

'He is my master. I am Blade.'

'I am Abu Sadr Marak, Sheik of the Hadramaut.' Framed in the white burnous the face was thin-lipped, the black eyes

calculating. A narrow, watchful face burned by the wind and sun, the creases deeply etched at the corners of the eyes. The face of a young man and a cruel one. A hard face, proud, without pity. Blade remembered the impaling stakes by the polluted wells, the fly-blown corpse of the child floating headless in the foul water.

The men behind Marak were all young. Tall, straight-backed, hook-nosed. They stood with the easy, poised grace of fighters, watching Blade with the fighter's cold eyes. He saw that this was no ordinary tribe. There were no elders, no shepherds. Only warriors. A renegade company, seeded with the original Maaruf Saar, picked up along the desert wastes by their leader. Raiders without a clan. Spoilers. Wolves.

'Are we welcome among thy people, Abu Marak?' Blade said, using the formal words of desert etiquette where water was jealously guarded and food scarce. The smell of dirt was rank in his nostrils, the buzz of flies loud about his head.

Marak looked past him at the Brownings. A flicker of amusement showed briefly in his eyes. 'And if I say no to thee, Ingleez?' His voice was thin, throaty, at once teasing and menacing.

Blade smiled. 'Then thou art a dead man, my friend. As dead as Yasi Ahmed bin Hafid.'

Marak's brows came together in a deep frown, his eyes hard. His hand tightened on the hilt of his knife. The men behind him fanned out, giving themselves room, their rifles sliding automatically into their hands. A hundred and twenty, Blade decided. Maybe a hundred and thirty. And still too closely bunched, too vulnerable to a burst from the Brownings. He took some comfort from that. Some, but not much. If Race had to open fire he knew he would never get back to the truck.

'Dost thou travel the desert to speak to me of a dog?' Marak said contemptuously. 'Is it for this foolishness that Ismeet hath sent thee?'

Blade felt the sweat trickling down his back under his

overalls. A fly settled on his cheek. He forced himself to ignore it, standing stone-still, the middle finger of his right hand pushed through the ring on the grenade. He and Marak were like the opposite poles of a magnet, creating between them a force field of enormous tension. He said calmly, 'As to that of which we may speak, it is not a matter for now. Only cowards and women gossip in the sun, being afraid of what may lie in wait for them in the tent. Is it not so, ya Sidi? See, we are tired and the stains of our journey are upon us. Has the courtesy of the desert died with bin Hafid that a sheik should receive his guests so meanly? Hast thou neither water nor salt for the stranger who comes in peace?'

Marak's frown deepened at this second mention of bin Hafid's name. His thin lips tightened, stretching over his teeth. Behind him his men stirred restlessly, murmuring. Blade heard a metallic click as Race cocked the Brownings and wished it were Harris behind him, covering him. A man he understood. A man he could trust.

The silence grew around them. Blade felt the seconds ticking away like a time bomb. The grenade in his right hand was slippery with sweat.

Then Marak threw back his head and laughed. 'Ismeet is well-served by his servant,' he said. 'We speak the same language, thou and I, Ingleez.'

Blade said levelly, 'I speak the language of peace, ya Sidi, having the means to put meat on the bones of my words.'

Marak nodded, looking at the trucks, at Hooper, at Race behind the Brownings. 'Is it not so, Effendi?' He gestured towards his men. 'For us both.' He held out his hands. 'Thou art welcome to all we have, thou and thy people. Put away the guns and be among friends. Tonight we eat as brothers in the tent.'

Whatever unbrotherly things we may do to each other tomorrow, Blade thought. He eased his finger out of the ring on the grenade, took his hands out of his pockets and inclined his head politely. 'Inshallah, ya Sidi.'

'Aywah. It is as Allah wills, may his name be blessed,' Marak said, touching his forehead, lips and breast in the ritual gesture of welcome.

Blade stepped forward then and they shook hands, the force-field collapsing, the tension gone. That night they would be safe. Guests in the black tents, Marak's salt in their stomachs a guarantee of life.

Tomorrow? Tomorrow was another day, another life. The sun rose and the sun set. In the Hadramaut, if you lived to see both events, that was enough.

4

Marak's fingers were long, the nails black-rimmed with dirt. He dug them into the centre of a flat loaf, gouged out soft bread and wiped his mouth with it. His beard was greasy with mutton fat. His eyes bright with greed. He belched heavily and said, 'A gift? Thou hast a gift for me, Ingleez?'

'We do not come empty-handed, ya Sidi,' Blade said.

'What is this gift?' There was greed in the voice, too, thinning the back-street, gutter whine.

Blade shrugged, playing him along. 'A trifle. But in thy hands not without power.'

Marak licked his lips. Power was a word he understood. 'Thou speakest of a weapon?'

'As thou sayest. A weapon.'

'A pistol?'

Blade smiled. 'Pistols are for boys. A sheik deserves better than that, is it not so?'

The tent was hot and dimly-lit, like a mine; the low, black roof pit-propped with poles. The smell of burning fat from the oil lamps combined with the reek of unwashed bodies, the rancid stench of goats' butter with which the Bedu greased their hair. Blade sat cross-legged on the square of carpet opposite Marak, Race on his right, Hooper on his left. They were eating out of a huge bowl of mutton stew thickened with cereal, spiced with herbs to mask the taste of rotten meat. Around them the Maaruf leaned on their elbows, eating, laughing, quarrelling. The noise drummed into Blade's head.

Cramp squeezed the muscles of his back and thighs. His mouth was filmed with a coating of jellied mutton fat. He thought with envy of Finch sitting in the back of the three-tonner eating bully and biscuits and tinned peaches washed down with cold tea. Finch on his own with his rifle and his knife and his quick cat's eyes. Finch whose presence was at yet unsuspected by Marak. Finch their ace-in-the-hole.

'Thou hast it here now?' Marak said, half-angry, half-pleading, like a teased child.

'In the big truck,' Blade said. 'We could go and get it if thou . . .'

'Bring it,' Marak said abruptly. He chewed, turned his head politely and spat out a shred of gristle. He nodded at Hooper. 'Send him to get it.'

'If that is thy wish.'

'Aywah.'

Blade leaned forward deliberately, chose a chunk of meat from the dish and put it into his mouth. His movements were slow, elaborately careful. The movements of a man under whose feet the ice is very thin indeed. After a moment he swallowed and said, 'I am disappointed in thee, Abu Marak. I had thee marked as a true sheik.'

Anger flared in Marak's eyes. 'Who is he who denies it?'

'None,' Blade said, 'save only thyself.'

Marak's hand went to the hilt of his knife. 'I do not like riddles, Ingleez.'

'It is no riddle. Hast thou not a sheik's sense of dignity and occasion? I thought to see thee return with my gift in thy hands. Stand in the entrance of the tent with all thy men watching in envy.' Blade shook his head slowly. 'It seems I was mistaken.'

Marak looked at him with narrowed eyes, anger and vanity struggling in his face. A street Arab, risen by violence above his station. A man without a pedigree in a highly-traditional society, dangerous in his insecurity.

Blade put his hand on the rifle lying on the carpet beside

Marak; an old .22, the wood of the butt scored, the barrel scratched. He stroked it lightly, fastidiously, with the tips of his fingers. The men sitting nearest to them stopped eating and reached for their own guns.

'Any son of a dog can carry a rifle nearly as old as himself,' Blade said dispassionately. 'Sit in his place in the tent and have it brought to him by the servant who brings him his food.' He looked round at the Maaruf. 'Is it not so, my brothers?' He broke a piece off one of the loaves and wiped his fingers carefully on the bread. 'But a sheik – ' he smiled, holding Marak's eyes – 'a sheik stands tall above all men with his sten gun in his hands.'

Marak stared at him. 'An esten gun? Thou wouldst give me an esten?'

'With two hundred rounds of ammunition.' Blade saw the suspicion flicker in Marak's eyes and wondered if he had overplayed his hand. Nobody in his right mind handed out sten guns to the Bedu. A ceremonial dagger, perhaps. A sack of flour for the women to bake bread. But not guns. Any true sheik would have known at once that it was a trap. Marak knew it too, or suspected it. But Marak was an upstart and greedy. Feeding his vanity on violence to compensate for his lack of inbred, tribal status. He needed that sten badly, for the power it would give him and the kudos it represented.

Blade waited a moment, spinning it out, timing it. Then he said casually, but loud enough for the men around to hear, 'Of course, if thou art afraid to . . . .'

'Watch thy tongue, Ingleez,' Marak said. 'Thou art the guest of a sheik, remember.'

Blade smiled. 'Would a sheik fear to walk in the dark with his guest?'

The man on Marak's left looked at his leader and grinned, gap-toothed, scornful. Marak glowered at him. The man's grin hardened, became a silent snarl.

'So,' Blade said. 'Do I have to send my man? Or wilt thou

come thyself, ya Sidi?' The inflection in his voice made the courtesy title a glove flicked insolently in Marak's face.

Marak hesitated, his eyes cunning. 'We will go together,' he said after a moment. 'As brothers.' There was something in the way he said it, a certain sly smoothness, that warned Blade to be careful.

'Aywah,' he said. 'As brothers.'

Marak put his hand on the arm of the man beside him. 'I and Yusef, thou and Raze. That one – ' he pointed to Hooper – 'he stays.'

Blade shook his head. 'La,' he said firmly. 'No.'

'He stays,' Marak said, his voice flat and final.

'Until?'

'Until I return with the esten gun.'

'Sten gun?' Blade raised surprised eyebrows. 'What sten gun?'

Marak looked at him, confused. 'The esten of which thou hast spoken.' The gutter whine was there again, peevish, petulant. 'The gift thou hast brought for me.'

Blade got up, Race and Hooper rising with him. 'Gifts are for friends,' he said bleakly. 'The symbols of trust. Where there is no trust there can be no gifts.' He gave Marak a formal nod. 'We thank thee for thy hospitality, Abu Marak. May Allah protect thee.' He touched the .22 rifle with the toe of his boot. 'With that weapon, he will need to.'

They were halfway to the entrance of the tent when Marak spoke. 'Where art thou going, Ingleez?'

'To the trucks,' Blade said over his shoulder. 'In the company of men.'

The silence in the tent was electric. The two men sitting by the entrance stood up, their hands dropping to the hilts of their knives.

'I have but to speak a word,' Marak said, 'and thou art wolf meat. Thou and thy – ' he paused, emphasising the insult – 'men. Then all that thou hast in the trucks is mine.'

Blade turned then and looked back at him. All over the tent

now the Bedu were alert, watchful, sitting upright, their rifles held across their chests. 'We have eaten thy salt, Abu Marak,' he said. 'We stand unarmed as guests in thy tent. Is it not so?'

Marak nodded grudgingly. 'It is so.'

'Yet thou wouldst feed us to thy wolves?' Blade shook his head. 'This I do not understand. Did honour also die with bin Hafid?'

Marak sat very still on the carpet, only his eyes moving, searching the faces of the men around him, seeing there expectancy, puzzlement, a hunger for action.

'Well?' Blade said. 'Do we return thy hospitality with a gift? Or do we die among dogs? Art thou indeed a sheik of the Hadramaut, father of the Maaruf Saar? Or merely a jackal among jackals?'

'Easy, Skip,' Hooper breathed in his ear. 'Don't push the bastard too far.'

Blade watched Marak's face, saw the hatred naked in his eyes. He put his hand into his pocket and touched the grenade like a man touching a good luck charm. The silence was absolute, thick as the air about them. Nobody moved. Marak was trapped and he knew it. Life was of little value in the desert; the protocol of death all-important. Etiquette was everything. To kill an unarmed man who had eaten salt in the tent was shameful. And in a sheik unforgivable.

Marak shrugged and smiled, lifting his hands and shoulders in a gesture of defeat. But his eyes were undefeated, the hatred in them unquenched. 'Thou art right, Ingleez,' he said. 'It is not for brothers to quarrel over a gift.'

'Nor the manner of giving,' Blade said.

Marak nodded. 'It is the truth.'

'Thou wilt come with me, then? To the truck?'

'I will come.' Marak put a hand on Yusef's shoulder and pulled himself upright. Blade felt the tension sag. The tips of his fingers thanked the grenade. 'I and two of my men,' Marak said, his eyes sly again. 'To carry the ammunition.'

Blade shrugged. Marak was entitled, under the rules, to

save a little face. 'Bring them all,' he said, 'if that is thy wish.'

'Two will be enough, Ingleez. The rest will wait my return. With the esten.'

Some will, Blade thought. Most of them, perhaps. But not all. Before we're halfway to the trucks they'll be moving through the trees behind us, rifles cocked, ready for trouble. 'As the sheik pleases,' he said.

Outside the moon was up, touching the wells with silver, piling great banks of shadow under the palms. The night was beautiful, the way it always was in the desert; the sky brilliant with stars, the air cool and fresh in their faces as they walked. From the tent of the women came the sound of singing; a high-pitched plaintive melody, endlessly repeated. Somewhere up-wind a jackal was howling.

At the edge of the trees Marak stopped short and gripped Blade's arm. 'There is a light in the truck.'

Finch had switched on the inspection lamp in the back of the three-tonner. One half of the back flap was rolled up. Blade could see the light bulb hanging on its flex from one of the struts under the tilt.

'Thou hast a man there?' Marak said. It was more than a question. It was an accusation.

'Aywah,' Blade said calmly. Finch would be lying on the top of the tilt, pressed flat to the canvas, sighting along the barrel of his rifle.

Marak sucked in his breath. 'Call to him, Ingleez. In the moonlight all men look alike. A trigger is quickly squeezed. Only regret takes time.'

You old fox, Blade thought, grudgingly admiring. You don't miss a damned trick, do you? 'Hullo, CATCHER,' he shouted. 'We come with guests. The sheik and two of his men.'

'OK, Skip.' Finch's voice was muffled by a handkerchief. It sounded as though he were inside the truck, not on top of it.

Marak nodded. 'Shukkran. Now we go.'

Blade led the way across the sand, Marak and his two men

close behind him, Race and Hooper in the rear. When they got to the three-tonner Blade reached in over the tailboard. Finch had left the unloaded sten ready, lying on an ammunition locker with a full clip beside it. Blade picked up the gun and turned to face Marak. The Bedu looked at it, his face seamed with greed in the light of the inspection lamp.

'Thy sten, ya Sidi,' Blade said, giving it to him.

Marak held the gun in both hands, testing its balance, enjoying the feel of it. Then he swung round to face his men with the gun held high above his head. 'Wallahi,' he said. 'Ana sheik dilwaqti. Now I am truly a sheik.'

Blade smiled, reached into the truck and picked up the full magazine. Hooper was standing directly behind the two Bedu who were staring at the sten like men come to the end of the rainbow five minutes too late to scoop the pot of gold. He caught Blade's eye and nodded. Race was about a yard from him, on the edge of the pool of light. The set-up was complete, the pattern as they had planned it. Blade hoped Finch was ready. 'Why don't we go round to the front of the truck?' he said pleasantly. 'I'll switch on the headlights and thou canst try out the gun.'

Marak saw the magazine in Blade's hands and grinned. 'Aywah. Let us do that.' As he walked round the side of the truck, Blade jerked the cord that held the back flap open. It rolled down, blocking the light. There was a sudden flurry of movement in the darkness as Hooper smashed the heads of the two Bedu together and kicked their legs out from under them. At the same moment, Finch up on top of the tilt dropped the loop of the tow rope neatly over Marak's head and shoulders. Marak lunged forward instinctively and the rope tightened on its slip knot, pinning his arms to his sides. Before he could cry out Finch was down beside him, one hand clamped over the Bedu's mouth, the other holding the point of the knife under his chin. 'Eskut, ya ibn el kelp,' Finch said in his execrable Arabic. 'Let's keep it quiet, mate.'

Blade snatched the sten from Marak, snapped in the clip

and cocked it. He pulled the curved dagger out of Marak's belt and threw it away into the darkness. 'That you won't need,' he said in English.

He went quickly to the back of the truck, hoisted the flap and climbed in. He squatted on his heels with his back to the cartons of rations stacked behind the cab. Finch half-lifted Marak in over the tailboard. He had secured the rope tightly, knotting it in the small of Marak's back. He made him sit on the bedroll with his back to Blade. Blade pressed the muzzle of the sten between Marak's shoulders. 'Thy men are watching thee, Marak,' he said softly. 'Keep thy mouth shut and thy head high like the sheik thou wouldst have them think thee.'

Finch grinned. 'That's telling the bastard, Skip,' he said, dropped down and went round to the cab.

Marak sat still, clearly visible to anyone watching from among the trees, apparently at ease under the inspection lamp. So long as he sat there unprotesting his men would not fire into the truck.

The engine of the fifteen-hundredweight started up. That was Hooper. Race would be up behind him on the steel platform, manning the Brownings. The three-tonner's starter motor whirred. The engine caught, ran lumpily for a couple of seconds, coughed and died.

From among the trees came the rattle of rifle fire aimed at the fifteen-hundredweight. Blade heard the quick, hard yammer of the Brownings as Race fired a short burst into the trees. He had loaded tracers in with the normal rounds. Blade saw them streak into the black shadows, heard – or thought he heard – a cry of pain. Behind him in the cab Finch was punching the starter button. The high whine of the Bendix was urgent, a call for help.

Through the open flap Blade saw the white swathe of light scythe across the oasis as Hooper took the fifteen-hundredweight round in a tight circle. The palm trees stood out, silver against the blackness, like trees in a negative photograph. The

Bedu dived for cover. The Brownings sprayed another burst into them.

'Come on, Chaff,' Blade said between his teeth. 'Get a grip, for God's sake.'

Without turning his head, Marak said, 'Thou art in trouble, Ingleez. Thy treachery has delivered thee into my . . . .'

The engine backfired explosively, ran unevenly for a moment, spluttered, roared into full life. Blade blinked the sweat out of his eyes and saw a hand fasten itself on the rim of the tailboard. A brown, long fingered, broken-nailed hand. He thrust Marak aside and brought the barrel of the sten down hard. There was a spurt of blood, the crunch of bone. The crippled hand disappeared. Up on one knee, Blade fired down over the tailboard. The crouching Bedu jerked upright as the bullets slammed into him, went over backwards in an arc and crumpled on the sand.

They were moving now, the truck lurching over the rough ground, Finch slipping the clutch to ease the wheel spin. A bullet whined in through the open back flap, struck one of the metal struts and ripped out through the top of the tilt. Blade whipped the flap down and swung the sten round to cover Marak. Another bullet struck the tailboard and ricocheted away.

Marak was on his knees, struggling to balance, hampered by the rope that pinioned his arms. Finch slewed the truck hard left, throwing Marak on to his back. Blade staggered, braced himself against the side wall, standing above Marak, ramming the sten down into his ribs. He reached up with his left hand and switched off the inspection lamp. The untethered half of the back flap was thrashing and cracking like a sail as the speed built up. Blade saw the lights of the fifteen-hundredweight behind and to his right. Race was a vague figure in the reflected glare, crouched feet apart over the Brownings, hosing the trees. Finch changed into top. The truck squatted purposefully on its suspension, rounded a pile

of rocks and thrust itself forward. They were out of the oasis. On their way.

Blade crouched down, wedging his back in the angle between the metal side of the truck and the ration cartons. He sighted the sten on Marak's stomach and held it steady. The back of the truck was full of flying sand sucked in through the flap.

'So, Ingleez,' Marak said bitterly. 'There is honour still in the Hadramaut, is there?'

'La,' Blade said. 'No. There can be no honour. Not while the bodies of little children float headless in the wells, their mothers raped, their father's spitted on stakes.'

'It is the Bedu way,' Marak said, not apologising, stating a fact.

'It is not our way. Nor was it the way of bin Hafid.'

Marak nodded. 'And what is to be the manner of my death?'

'That time is not yet. First there is talking to be done. Questions asked and answered. Truthfully answered.'

'With Ismeet?'

'He will be there. And others.'

'Thou art taking me back to thy camp at Zubair?'

'Aywah.'

The fifteen hundredweight pulled alongside and went into the lead. As its headlights lit up the interior of the three-tonner for an instant Blade saw that Marak was smiling. 'Inshallah.' His eyes mocked Blade. 'If God wills.' It sounded like a threat. Zubair was eight hundred miles away. 'They will come, Ingleez. My wolves. They will come for me.'

Blade said nothing. He knew it was true. The Maaruf would come, if not for Marak himself then for the weapons and food in the trucks. Food and guns – these were the basic realities in the desert, more important than honour or loyalty.

He settled his shoulders more comfortably, bracing his legs against the swaying of the truck. The next few hours would

be critical. Night driving in the desert, even with powerful headlights, was hazardous. Given a firm, rock-free surface it was possible to average perhaps twenty-five miles an hour. No more. Often much less. Which meant that racing camels ridden by determined, angry men were hard to shake off.

They stopped after an hour, cut the lights and stood listening. There was hardly any wind. Under the blaze of the moon and the midnight stars the desert was silent; a cold, quivering silence, as if the world had just died. In those conditions sound travelled far, the jingle of camel harness drifting ten miles down the wind, faint but clear like the rattle of a ghostly chain.

They heard nothing. Only the tick of the cooling metal in the engines, the scrape of their boots on the sand. Hooper lay down and pressed his ear to the ground. After a moment he raised his head and shook it. 'If they're coming, Skip, they're too far back to worry about.'

'They're coming.' Blade said. Steadily, relentlessly, like a stoat after a rabbit, they were coming. And there was bad ground ahead.

They wrapped Marak in a blanket and trussed him up – ankles, knees, wrists, elbows – wedged him in, flat on his back, against the petrol tins in the three-tonner and strapped the back flap down tight. Hooper got up into the cab beside Finch. Blade joined Race in the fifteen-hundredweight. They put on their sheepskin coats against the night cold and pressed on.

The sun rose at four-thirty and they stopped to make tea. They were down off the high ground now, east of Majran on a course that would take them north past the Wadi Dawasir towards Laila. The last hour and a half had been slow, difficult going, the ground ribbed with rock between stretches of soft sand through which they had ploughed in low gear. Blade reckoned they had perhaps another thirty miles of this to cover. Then they would hit the salt flats and start to make good time. If they got that far the stoat would lose the rabbit.

While the water in the dixie was coming to the boil they did a quick check on the trucks and topped up the tanks. Blade called up Zubair on the radio. Harry Gordon, the Signals Officer, came through faint and breathy. They were operating at the limit of the set.

'Hullo, CATCHER. This is Base. This is Base. Over.'

'SNATCH,' Blade said. 'I say again, SNATCH.' SNATCH was the code word for success.

'I hear you, Jack. Bloody good show. Need any back-up? Over.'

'Negative. Later we might.' Blade gave the map reference to pin-point their position and read off the course they would follow.

'Roger,' Gordon said. 'O Orange is standing by just north of Zilfi. Give me a Mayday if you want 'em. Over.'

'Will do. Over and out.'

Blade took a mug of tea, climbed into the back of the three-tonner, pulled Marak up into a sitting position and held the mug to his lips. He drank greedily, stopped for breath, filled his mouth again and spat the tea at Blade. Blade poured the rest of it over his head, pushed him down, got out of the truck and left him.

Race was standing on the deck of the fifteen-hundred-weight, searching the high ground behind them with the binoculars.

'Anything?' Blade said.

'Not so far, Skip.' Race panned slowly along the ridge. His voice was relaxed, almost warm. Blade had noticed the change in him since they had walked out of the tent with Marak. Driving through the night he had been easy, almost chatty. As if the action had somehow released him from himself, made him one of the CATCHER family. 'Oh-oh,' he said. 'Hold everything.' His finger curled round the adjusting screw, extending the focus. 'Aywah,' he said then. 'That's them.' He handed the binoculars to Blade. 'Ten o'clock, Skip. You can't miss it.'

Blade focused the glasses carefully, staring to his left front over the grey-brown hump of the escarpment, seeing the rocks huge in the powerful lenses. The small dust cloud was distant - twenty miles plus – rolling along the ridge, travelling fast over the broken ground that had slowed the trucks in the darkness. He watched it for a few seconds, estimating the speed.

'What d'you reckon?' Race said. 'An hour?'

'Bit more than that,' Blade said. 'They've got the scree in front of 'em.' Camels were slow on scree, better on sand. He dropped the binoculars into their leather case. 'OK. Let's get cracking, chaps. The sooner we get to the salt, the quicker we'll lose 'em.'

A little over an hour later they entered a shallow wadi leading out on to the salt flats. Race stopped the truck and Blade got out and walked on ahead, testing the surface. Under a thin covering of yellow sand there was a firm bed of stones marking the course of a river that had once flowed into the lagoon. He walked down about two hundred yards and it was all good, hard core stuff. He turned and looked back. Hooper and Finch were standing by the fifteen-hundredweight talking to Race, smoking cigarettes. He could hear them laughing together. He smiled to himself, relief washing over him. This was what he had been waiting for; how it should have been from the beginning. A family.

He took out the binoculars and trained them back along the foot of the escarpment. The dust cloud was nearer now. Perhaps fifteen miles. But the salt flats were less than a mile away, offering escape. Good, fast going for trucks, impossible for camel riders. The salt was like a vast oven plate, blinding white, reflecting the heat of the sun. You could take a camel across it by night, but not by day. Once the sun was up, not even the Bedu could do that.

He whistled and waved his hand. Hooper and Finch went back to the three-tonner. The trucks started down towards him. He swung himself in beside Race who grinned at him

cheerfully, his goggles pushed up on his forehead, the cigarette jaunty in the corner of his mouth.

The wadi narrowed, turned sharply right. They came round the curve and saw the salt waiting across a beach of yellow sand; a long, white runway to freedom. Race threw away his cigarette, gave a little yelp of satisfaction and accelerated. They shot out of the mouth of the wadi, the gradient easing a little as they hit the sand. It was about three hundred yards wide; firm and smooth under the big tyres. They were nearly two-thirds of the way across when they struck the soft patch. Blade braced his feet on the metal floor of the truck and gripped the top of the dashboard. 'Watch it, Tom.'

The truck slowed abruptly, began to wallow, snaking from side to side as the rear wheels slipped, found a purchase, gripped and slipped again.

'Keep her going,' Blade said urgently.

Race swung right, found a hard surface, put his foot down. Almost immediately the front wheels dipped. Great fan-shaped sprays of soft sand rose like a bow wave on either side of the truck. The rear wheels left the hard patch and ploughed heavily into the furrows left by the front tyres. It was like running into a wall.

'Come on, you bloody cow,' Race said savagely. He whipped into low gear and stood hard on the throttle pedal. The engine howled, labouring. The rear wheels dug down deeply, spewing out a great cloud of sand. The truck vibrated, shaking like a ship with its screw out of the water. The back end bottomed with a bone-jarring thud. The truck was stranded now, the wheels buried, each in its own pit, turning sluggishly in the clinging sand. Blade heard the note of the engine falter and then rise in a shrieking crescendo. He looked quickly at Race. The sergeant was sitting rigidly, arms locked, hands clamped white-knuckled on the steering wheel, right foot stamped down holding the throttle pedal against the floor plates.

'For God's sake, Tom,' Blade shouted above the scream of the engine. He reached across and cut the ignition. In the sudden silence as the engine died he said shakily, 'What in hell are you trying to do, man?'

Race didn't answer; didn't even turn his head. Just sat there frozen in the bucket seat staring at the salt, his lower lip quivering.

Finch had stopped the three-tonner at the edge of the soft sand. He and Hooper came leaping and ploughing towards the fifteen-hundredweight, the furrowed sand flying up like spray from their boots. Finch was beside himself with anger. He grabbed Race's right arm as if to drag him out of the truck. 'You bloody fool.' His voice was hoarse, high-pitched. 'You must be round the twist. Of all the damned-stupid-ham-fisted clots . . .' He glared at Race, the sweat running down his face, his eyes blazing. 'You've only written the bloody truck off, mate. You know that, don't you? Dug the wheels in solid, tramped on the bloody throttle and twisted the half-shaft off like it was made of bloody plasticine.'

Race stared straight ahead as if mesmerised. He made a curious choking noise in his throat. Blade saw, with embarrassed astonishment, that there were tears mingled with the sweat on his face.

'Ever since we left the Halfway House,' Finch said, 'you've been a jinx on this trip, Race. Big-mouthed. Moody as all get-out. A right little ray of bloody sunshine.'

'Leave it Chaff,' Blade said. Race was in shock, was probably incapable of hearing anything. 'Bawling him out isn't going to . . .'

But Finch was wound up, unstoppable. All the frustration and tension of the past week boiling up inside him. He shook Race's arm, wrenching the sergeant's hand off the wheel. 'Look at me, damn you. You gutless, know it-all bastard. Who the hell d'you think you . . . . ?'

Race exploded into action. His right elbow smashed into Finch's face, breaking his grip, throwing him off-balance. As

Finch staggered back, blood spurting from his nose, Race swung his legs out of the truck, dropped to the ground in a half-crouch and came up fast with his right arm stiff and straight like an iron bar. The heel of his hand caught Finch under the chin. His head snapped back. His knees buckled. Race hit him hard just below the heart. Finch went down in a heap on the sand. Race turned, his eyes blank, and began to walk away across the beach, head down, arms swinging wildly.

Blade jumped out of the truck and ploughed round the bonnet towards Finch. But the corporal was already back on his feet, blowing hard, spraying blood, his knife in his hand, murder in his eyes. He lunged forward, thrusting Blade aside, struggling to keep his balance in the churned-up sand. Behind him, Hooper reached out almost casually, slid his hand under Finch's right armpit and across his chest and held him fast. 'You heard the Skipper, Chaff,' he said quietly, easily. 'Let the bastard go.'

Finch writhed in Hooper's grip, the toes of his boots digging into the sand, his back arching. There was blood on his lips and chin and his eyes were wild. 'Let me at him, damn you. Let me get my hands on the . . . .'

'Forget it, Finch,' Blade said harshly. 'Can't you see he's slipped a cog?'

Finch glared at him. The struggle was now an internal one. He was screwed up tight, teetering dangerously on the edge of violent, mindless action, as precariously balanced as a set trap. It needed only one wrong word, spoken in the wrong tone of voice, to spring him.

'Put the knife away, son,' Hooper said in his deep, slow voice. 'We've got things to do.'

Blade saw Finch shudder. His mouth clamped shut. The anger in his eyes flared and blazed – and died. He shook his head as the tension went out of him. 'OK,' he said thickly. 'I'm OK now, Hoop.'

Hooper released him, looked at Blade and nodded. Finch

slid his knife into its sheath, wiped the blood off his chin with his sleeve and grinned a little shamefacedly. 'It's been a long night, Skip,' he said.

Blade nodded, recognising the apology. Hooper began to unstrap a spade, hissing gently between his teeth. Race was out on the salt now, walking away from them. He started to shimmer in the reflected glare, the outlines of his body suddenly vague, insubstantial as a ghost. 'What about him?' Hooper said, standing knee-deep in the soft sand with the spade in his fist.

Blade shrugged. 'He'll be back. Let him walk it out of his system.'

They went round to the back of the truck. Hooper knelt down and began to shovel the sand away from the wheel. He cleared a space round it, dug down under it, the spade like a teaspoon in his hands. When the wheel hung freely suspended over a shallow pit he backed off a little, checked that the chassis was firmly supported on the ground and hooked the spade in behind the wheel. He gave a quick, sharp tug. The wheel fell off exposing the end of the half-shaft, the bright metal glinting where it had sheared under the strain.

Finch spat disgustedly. 'Even money the other side's the same. The bastard's not fit to push a bloody pram let alone drive a truck.' His voice was steadier now. The anger was still there but contained. Under control.

Hooper stood up and threw the spade on to the steel deck of the truck. 'She's a write-off, Skip.'

Blade nodded, his mind racing. Back along the line of the escarpment the dust cloud was bigger now, clearly visible without the binoculars. He calculated they had half an hour. Perhaps less. 'OK,' he said. 'Let's get organised. Chaff, get a Mayday off to base. Tell 'em to get that back-up group down here fast.'

'Roger.' Finch climbed into the passenger seat, pulled up the aerial and reached for the headphones.

Hooper said, 'Strip her down, Skip?'

'Everything,' Blade said. 'Brownings, ammo, radio – the lot. We'll run the three-tonner in behind those rocks just this side of the bend. Rig some sort of mounting for the Brownings and dig in.'

Hooper opened the tool locker built into the side of the fifteen-hundredweight and started sorting through the big wrenches. Finch was crouched over the microphone, the headphones clamped over his ears. Blade walked back to the three-tonner, climbed in behind the wheel and reversed away from the soft sand. He swung the truck round, drove up the wadi and backed in behind the rockfall. He cut the engine and got down. Hooper was up on the deck behind Finch, dismantling the Brownings. Blade walked up to the bend and looked back. The three-tonner was well-hidden. If they could site the Brownings reasonably firmly they had a chance.

Out on the salt, Race was a tiny, matchstick figure dwarfed by the immensity of the featureless plain. He had stopped walking. He looked lonely; a man without terms of reference, insignificant. A speck in the vomit of God. Blade tried to pick him up through the binoculars, but the glare off the salt defeated him. He shook his head and walked back down to the three-tonner meeting Finch coming up with the box of grenades in his arms.

'Get through all right?'

Finch nodded, the sweat pouring off him. The heat off the rocks was fierce. Another hour and the wadi would be like a furnace. 'O Orange on their way, Skip.'

'Good show,' Blade said automatically. If the back-up group drove all day and through the night they would reach the wadi around eight the next morning. He wondered what they would find.

Finch put the box down and said awkwardly, 'Sorry I tangled with Race just now.' He brushed the flies off his face. 'That bastard really gets up my nose. What the hell's eating him anyway?'

Blade shrugged. 'He's been over too long.'

'We've all been over too long. But we don't go spare just because a truck bogs down.'

'So he panicked,' Blade said irritably. 'He's probably feeling as badly about it as we are.'

'The hell he is. He thinks the sun shines out of his arse.'

'Don't we all?' Blade said. 'On a good day.'

Finch heard the edginess in his voice. 'Take it easy, Skip. It's not your fault.'

Not my fault, Blade thought. But my responsibility.

Hooper came striding up the wadi carrying the Brownings, yards of belted ammunition draped round his shoulders. He had unbolted the complete gun mounting. They helped him to site the guns, burying the tripod legs in hard sand, piling rocks on them to weigh them down. Finch fetched a coil of wire, three iron spikes and a two-pound hammer from the three-tonner. Blade held the spikes while Hooper hammered them into the rock. Finch ran the wire out to them from the tripod and pulled it tight. Blade gripped the twin barrels and shook them. They stayed rigid.

Hooper and Finch went back down to the fifteen-hundredweight for the rest of the ammunition, the radio and the batteries. Blade dropped the tailboard of the three-tonner and dragged out a couple of boxes of sten and .303 rounds. Trussed in the blanket, Marak watched him, a sardonic smile on his face. 'They come, Ingleez?' he said.

Blade nodded.

'Then thou art finished.' Marak's voice was a dry croak. 'Is it not written?'

'In thy book, perhaps. Not in mine.'

The inside of the truck was like an oven, crawling with flies. They clustered on the blanket, on Marak's face, round his mouth, at the corners of his eyes. He seemed untroubled by them. 'It is written, Ingleez,' he said and turned his face away.

The men came back from the fifteen-hundredweight. Finch

spread a couple of blankets on the sand beside the Brownings. 'Our little panicky friend is back,' he said.

'If you mean Sergeant Race,' Blade said coldly, 'say so.'

'Sorry, Skip.'

Blade helped Hooper to lay out the ammunition belts on the blankets, checking that the rounds were clipped in evenly, the belts free from kinks. 'How is he?' he said.

Finch said carefully, 'Sergeant Race is quiet, sir.'

Blade nodded. 'No need to overdo it, Chaff.' He walked back down to the beach. Race was kneeling at the edge of the salt, hammering a crowbar into the ground with a stone. He had already set up another bar in the firm sand about ten yards to the right of the stranded truck. He stood up and took a ball of twine out of his pocket, looping it over the crowbar and pulling it tight. Then he came up the beach, paying out the twine, digging his heels into the sand to test its firmness. He tied the twine to the second bar, knotted it and broke it off.

'Escape route?' Blade said.

Race nodded. 'We're going to need it.' His voice was level, his face expressionless. Whatever he was feeling inside he had come to terms with it out there on the salt, if not completely at least enough to be able to cope. He stepped carefully over the twine and came to the truck. Blade was standing by the spigot filling water bottles from the tank. Race reached past him, picked up his sten and slung it over his shoulder. He made no attempt to apologise for breaking the half-shaft. Blade was grateful for that.

Race walked round the back of the truck, hooked the sling of his sten over the hub of the spare wheel and crouched down. Blade corked the last water bottle, took out the binoculars and searched back along the escarpment behind the dust cloud. Nothing. He swung the glasses right. The dust cloud was close now, perhaps a mile from the top of the wadi. Below and just ahead of it he could see the riders rocking in their saddles. He put the glasses back in their case,

looped the water bottle slings over his shoulder and went to the back of the truck. 'Time we got up there, Tom.'

'I'm staying here,' Race said flatly. He was down on his knees behind the truck, digging out the sand with the spade, enlarging the pit Hooper had made, deepening it.

'Don't be a damned fool,' Blade said. 'We've set up the Brownings to provide cross-fire. I want you on them.'

'Hooper can handle them as well as I can. Better perhaps.' Race was banking the sand in a curve behind the truck, making a parapet. 'I'm staying here. When they come down the wadi I'll draw their fire. Keep 'em busy.'

Blade said brutally, 'And how long d'you think you'll last?'

'Long enough to bring 'em past you. Then you can swing the Brownings in behind 'em and chop 'em down.' Race stood up, sweating hard, the sand clinging to his face and forearms. He opened the ammunition locker and filled his pockets with magazines for the sten. Then he lowered himself carefully down under the rear of the truck into the pit behind the parapet, reached up for his sten and loaded it. He put his head out in front of the rear spring where the broken stub of the half-shaft gleamed in the sun. 'See you after the party, Skip.' His eyes held Blade's, half-defiant, half-pleading. Blade hesitated and then nodded. He recognised that this was something Race had to do. Something he had worked out for himself on the salt. A kind of atonement. Blade wanted to thank him, to let him know he understood. But any words of thanks would have sounded pompous, patronising. He handed Race a water-bottle. 'Keep your head down, then,' he said.

When he got back to the three-tonner Finch had made a meal of sorts; bully beef, biscuits, marmalade. 'Big eats,' he said. And then, 'Where's Race?'

Blade explained.

Finch snorted. 'Off his rocker,' he said. 'Or a bloody hero.'

'Maybe a bit of both,' Blade said.

'Aywah.' Finch took a handful of biscuits smeared with marmalade, sandwiched three thick slices of bully between

them and trotted off down to the fifteen-hundredweight. Blade smiled to himself. As the crisis approached it bred its own distinctive unity, breaking down the barriers, fostering a kind of forgiveness. Not for the first time, he was astonished and moved by the gentleness of men.

Finch came back at a run, wadded biscuit and bully into his mouth and squinted professionally at the brazen sky. 'Got a nice day for it,' he said. And added, 'I think the sergeant was hungry.'

They ate standing up, in a hurry, washing the food down with gulps of water. The flies were very bad, swarming round their heads, crawling on the food. When they had finished, Finch climbed into the back of the three-tonner and offered Marak water. He refused. Finch took his rifle and half-a-dozen spare clips and climbed up the rock wall behind the truck. He worked his way into a position overlooking the narrow bend, wedged himself down between two rocks and waved. Hooper turned an ammunition box on end, sat on it with his feet spread wide apart, cocked the Brownings and folded his enormous hands over the pistol grips. Blade got down behind a rock above and just behind him, set the sten to rapid fire and looked at his watch. It was coming up to eight o'clock, the shade temperature in the wadi pushing a hundred and ten and rising.

5

Finch saw them first and tossed a small stone down to warn the others. The thud of camel pads echoed like muffled drum-beats down the wadi.

'Let 'em go past us,' Blade said, and saw Hooper put up his thumb in acknowledgement.

The Maaruf came out of the bend bunched together, five abreast in the narrow neck of the wadi. They were riding hard, left hands held face-high on the reins, rifles clutched like spears in their right fists. The camels were lathered in sweat, their necks outstretched. Long ropes of saliva swung from their mouths. The hoarse rasp of their breathing sounded like a train. The Bedu shouted as they saw the stranded fifteen hundredweight. Twenty men, riding four deep, thudding down towards the beach, fanning out a little as the wadi widened.

Race let them come on, holding his fire until the back rank had passed the three-tonner. Then he squeezed the trigger of his sten, firing low to break the camel's legs and bring them down with their riders in a tangle of tasselled saddle cloths and kicking feet. The riders were catapulted forward out of the high saddles, rolling on the sand to within a few yards of him. The men behind reined back hard, the camels planting their feet, skidding into the fallen.

'Now,' Blade yelled as Race's sten began to spew out a fresh magazine. The Brownings swung smoothly on their swivel, the sound of their firing hammering back off the wadi walls.

Taken by surprise, the Bedu scattered, leaping off their camels, some running for the rocks on the far side of the wadi, others dropping prone behind the dead and dying animals. Hooper panned the Brownings in an arc, spraying the mouth of the wadi with bullets. Blade saw the end of the ammunition belt whip up off the blanket, ran forward and handed him a new one. Up on the high rocks Finch was coolly picking off men with his rifle. Race's sten was silent for a moment or two, only to break out again as he slammed in another clip.

So far it had been all CATCHER, but now the Bedu began to fire back. Blade ducked as a rock beside him splintered, the spent round flying off at a tangent, buzzing in the air like a giant wasp. A number of camels were running riderless back up the wadi towards the bend. Hooper whipped the Brownings round and mowed them down with a long burst.

Finch yelled, 'Behind you. Behind you.'

Blade turned quickly, bringing up his sten. The Bedu was crouched above him on a ridge of rock. He felt the wind of a bullet on his cheek, squeezed the trigger of the sten and held it down. The Bedu toppled off the rock in a slow, spectacular dive, arms outspread, the rifle spinning away from him. Blade looked up at Finch, saw him pull the pin of a grenade with his teeth and lob it out across the wadi. It exploded among the rocks opposite. The firing stopped abruptly.

They waited, sweating in the sudden silence. Bodies of men and camels lay strewn on the sand. Already the flies were busy on them, hovering and settling in great black clouds.

Blade called up to Finch. 'Any more coming?'

Finch looked up the wadi beyond the bend, turned and waved his arms in a negative gesture.

'What d'you think, Skip?' Hooper said. 'Was that all of 'em?' He was shining with sweat, saturated in it. The flies circled his head like a bee keeper's net.

Blade shook his head. 'There'll be a second wave.'

Finch's rifle cracked. Twenty yards away a Bedu slumped

forward over the corpse of a camel, his rifle sliding down the curve of the belly on to the sand.

Blade waited a couple of minutes and then cupped his hands round his mouth and shouted down to Race. 'Tom. Are you OK?'

There was no reply.

He shouted again. 'Can you hear me, Tom?'

Race didn't answer. Blade got out the binoculars and focused on the fifteen-hundredweight. There was no movement in the black shadow of the pit under the rear axle.

Hooper fired a short burst, wiped his face with his hand and said, 'Think he's bought it?'

Blade shrugged. 'I'd better take a look.' He put a fresh clip in his sten. 'Keep me covered, Hoop. I'll give you the wire.'

He worked his way down the side of the wadi behind the rocks. When he passed the man who had fallen from the ridge the flies rose briefly and settled again on the dead face. Or what was left of the face. The rocks petered out fifty yards from the truck. Blade crouched and looked across the stretch of sand. 'Tom. Are you all right?'

But there was still no answer.

'OK, Hoop,' Blade yelled. 'Now.'

As the Brownings began to yammer he ducked and raced across the sand and slid feet first down into the pit under the truck. It was alive with flies, buzzing, swarming, crawling black on the sand walls. Race was crouched down, his hands locked round his left thigh. The leg of his overalls was ripped, the flesh beneath gashed and welling blood. He looked up, his face pale under the tan, streaked with sweat and sand. 'I . . .'

'OK, Tom. Don't talk.' Blade untied the handkerchief round his neck, twisted it round Race's thigh above the wound and knotted it tightly. The locked hands released their grip and Race lay back against the side of the pit with a groan. Blade pushed the barrel of his pistol under the knotted handkerchief and turned it twice. The bleeding stopped. He felt in the hip pocket of his overalls for his field dressing. The flies

were thick on the blood-soaked trouser leg. He brushed them off and tore away the cloth, exposing the wound fully. He ripped open the dressing, pinched the edges of the wound together with his finger and thumb and pressed the pad of lint on it, binding it firmly round the thigh with the bandage. 'Better?'

Race nodded. 'Thanks, Skip.' His voice was uneven with shock.

Blade sat back on his heels, put a cigarette in Race's mouth and lit it for him. 'Can you move the leg?'

Race nodded, stretching it slowly, proving the bone was not broken. Blade wiped the sweat and dirt off the sergeant's face and grinned at him. 'You'll live.'

Race managed a faint grin in return. The colour was beginning to seep back into his cheeks. He drew hard on the cigarette. 'Man, oh man,' he said, staring over the lip of the parapet at the tumbled bodies on the sand. 'We really clobbered the bastards, didn't we?'

'Thanks to you.' Blade eased the tourniquet for a few moments and then turned the pistol barrel once. 'OK, Tom. Keep easing it like that every so often. We're pulling out before the next guests arrive.'

'There's more of 'em?'

'I think so. Up at the top of the wadi. They know we're here now so they'll probably come down on foot. Another quarter of an hour and those rocks up there'll be lousy with Bedu. We've got to be away before then.'

Race bent his good leg under him, struggling to get up. 'No,' Blade said. 'You take it easy. I don't want that wound opening up. Just lie still and keep your eyes skinned. We'll be back for you. With transport.'

He got the sergeant into a more comfortable position with his left leg stretched out in front of him, loaded the sten and put it beside him, punched him lightly on the shoulder and got ready to run. 'Now, Hoop,' he shouted. The Brownings opened up. He squirmed up out of the pit, jinked across the

sand to the rocks and made his way back to the three-tonner. 'OK. Let's get out of here.'

'Out?' Hooper said, surprised.

Blade nodded, dropped the tailboard of the truck and started re-loading the ammunition boxes.

'On the salt?' Hooper said. 'We're going to cross the salt?'

'Yes.' Blade said. A bullet whined off the rocks above his head. Another ricocheted off the steel roof of the cab. Hooper fired a short burst.

'With one truck, Skip?' he said.

'Right.' Blade humped the transceiver into the truck.

Watching the wadi, traversing the guns, Hooper said, 'We can hold 'em here, y'know.'

But Blade knew what he was really saying. Never go on the salt with only one truck. It was the first rule in the book, printed in red capitals, underlined twice. If the clutch burnt out or the gearbox stripped out on the salt you had to have a second vehicle to get you home. Without transport you were dead. Nobody walked across the salt in daylight and lived. Not even the Bedu.

'We can probably hold 'em till dark,' Blade said. 'After that, we've had it. But that's not the point. Not any more. Race's got a gash in his leg you can damn near put your hand in. The sooner we get him home the more chance there is of him keeping it. You know how quickly gangrene sets in in this fly-blown heat.' He raised the tailboard and pegged it. 'OK. Let's have the Brownings.'

He covered with the sten while Hooper pulled the locking pin and lifted the machine guns off the swivel, wrapped the long barrels in the blankets and stowed them in the truck. The tripod mounting they left. There was no way in which they could set it up in the three-tonner.

They stood side by side, their backs to the canvas tilt, and sprayed the wadi with their stens as Finch came down from the high rocks. There was no answering fire. Which did not necessarily mean all the Bedu were dead. They had been

known to lie motionless in the sun for two hours under intermittent fire and then get up and attack.

Finch got into the cab and started the engine. Hooper swung himself in over the tailboard. Blade climbed in beside Finch. 'Stop for Race,' he said. 'He's been hit in the leg.'

They jolted out of cover on to the sand, drove down the wadi to the beach zigzagging between the corpses of men and camels and stopped abreast of the fifteen-hundredweight on the edge of the soft sand. Hooper was out of the back, across the sand and into the pit almost before Blade had the cab door open. He lifted Race, passed him up to Blade, scrambled out of the pit and took him back in his arms. Blade ran to the three-tonner, dropped the tailboard and crouched beside it, firing his sten. Hooper put Race inside on the bedrolls gently, easily, as if handling a child. He slammed the tailboard up, slotted in the steel pegs and went in over it, lithe as a big cat. He began firing through the open back flap to cover Blade.

Blade ran back to the fifteen hundredweight, whipped the filler-cap off the long-range petrol tank, yanked the pin out of a grenade and dropped it in. A bullet buried itself in the sand by his left foot. He turned, ducked and sprinted for the three-tonner. The soft sand dragged at his feet, the sweat ran down into his eyes. Gasping, half-blind, he had his foot on the running-board, the cab door swinging above him, as Finch let in the clutch. He hauled himself up, blinked the sweat out of his eyes and saw three riderless camels walk sedately round the bend in the wadi. Two Bedu hung between them holding on to the saddle-girths, their legs drawn up under them. Hooper's sten was suddenly silent as the magazine emptied. Blade heard the crack of a rifle, felt a hard, nerve-numbing kick in his shoulder and fell forward, half-in, half-out of the cab. Finch grabbed him by the collar of his overalls with his left hand and accelerated smoothly round the crowbar marker Race had set up on the firm sand beyond the twine. The cab door swung to, hitting Blade sharply behind the knees. The pain broke the shock of the bullet in his shoulder.

He kicked the door open, drew in his legs and knelt on the floor of the cab, bent over the seat, his back to the dashboard. He reached out blindly with his right hand, found the edge of the door and pulled it shut.

Behind him in the back of the truck Hooper had begun firing again, the staccato stammer of the sten hammering through the howl of the engine. Blade squirmed round and hoisted himself onto the seat. His left shoulder felt heavy, his arm hung loosely at his side. But there was no pain. Not yet.

The truck staggered and lifted on its suspension, listing dangerously, as the fifteen-hundredweight exploded in a whoosh of flame. Blade clung to the dashboard with his right hand, feet braced hard on the metal floor, willing the truck not to roll over. Finch was wrestling with the wheel, fighting to turn into the list. 'Come on, you big, ugly bitch,' he yelled. 'Come ON, damn you.'

The truck fell back heavily on four wheels. Finch changed up into second and stood on the throttle pedal. Blade saw the salt rushing towards them, a great wave of white light that rose up and filled the windscreen with a blinding glare. There was a tremendous, spring-cracking jolt as the front wheels hit the concrete-hard surface. His hand lost its grip. His head snapped back against the metal wall of the cab. The white glare exploded into darkness.

6

He opened his eyes to salt glare and flies and the iron hammer of the sun. He was lying on his back, his head pillowed on a rolled blanket. His left arm was in a sling, the shoulder stiff and aching. He touched it cautiously and felt the pad of the field dressing.

Beside him, Race was propped against the rear wheel of the truck. 'Welcome back, Skip.'

Blade licked his lips. They were dry and crusted. His tongue felt too big for his mouth. His head throbbed with a heavy, irregular beat like the uneven tick-over of a truck engine. 'What time is it?'

'Half-eleven.' Race was sitting with his right knee drawn up, his left leg stuck out stiffly in front of him.

'How's the leg?'

'OK.' But there were lines of pain on his face and his colour was poor.

Finch came round the back of the truck with a mug of tea. 'Room service,' he said. 'Oh, you're back with us, Skip. Good show.' He gave the mug to Race and stood looking down at Blade. 'Like some chai?'

Blade sat up slowly and nodded. The tick-over in his head accelerated savagely. He closed his eyes for a moment.

'Cup of tea for the Skipper, Hoop,' Finch called. He was streaming with sweat, his hair plastered to his head, huge dark patches rimmed with white salt on his overalls.

'How far have we come?' Blade said.

'About eighty miles.'

'As much as that?'

Finch grinned. 'Faster we go, sooner we're off this bloody stuff.'

Hooper came with the tea, big and amiable as ever, sweating like a bull. Blade sipped the hot sweet liquid gratefully. Finch lit a cigarette and gave it to him.

'How's Marak?' Blade said, picking up the threads, but slowly, clumsily.

'Sad,' Finch said.

Hooper nodded solemnly. 'He's a worried man.'

He's not alone in that, Blade thought.

'I've been on the blower to Base,' Finch said. 'Orange'll be calling in at 14.00. Base'll give 'em our course and a new meeting-point. They estimate somewhere east of Laila around 17.00 hours.'

If the truck holds together, Blade thought. And the radio doesn't go on the blink. And there are no hostiles waiting for us on the other side of this lot.

He finished his tea, stubbed out his cigarette and held out his hand. Hooper pulled him up. He stood for a moment, suddenly dizzy. Then his head cleared. 'OK. Let's push on.'

Hooper got Race on his feet.

'Can you walk on that leg, Tom?' Blade said.

Race nodded, biting his lip. He hobbled round to the back of the truck. The tailboard was down. Inside, Marak lay inert in a black mist of flies. Hooper picked Race up and put him in the truck. Finch stowed away the pressure stove and climbed in with Race. Hooper fastened the tailboard. All their movements were ponderous, slowed down by the heat like the movements of deep-sea divers. Walking round the truck to the cab was like scaling a rock face.

Hooper opened the door on the passenger side and made to help Blade in.

'I can manage,' Blade said irritably.

Hooper hesitated, his hand on Blade's right elbow.

'For God's sake,' Blade snapped. 'I said I can manage.'

Hooper shrugged, walked round the bonnet and got in behind the wheel.

Blade said, 'Sorry, Hoop.'

Hooper nodded. 'Bloody salt. Bloody heat. Bloody stinking flies.' He switched on the ignition and pressed the starter button. The hot engine was reluctant to fire, every grinding turn of the Bendix a moment of crisis. When it eventually caught, Hooper revved hard to clear the cylinders, checked the oil pressure, moved the gear lever into first and released the clutch.

The next three hours were bad. The temperature in the cab was up above a hundred and thirty. The air blowing in through the open windows was stale, all the life burned out of it. It was an effort just to breathe. Their mouths and throats dried out quickly. They sat in pools of sweat, the feet swelling as the heat of the engine soaked into their boots. Blade's shoulder was throbbing, the pain a hot wire burning up the side of his neck into his brain. It felt as though the bullet were still buried in the flesh, melting slowly, dripping globules of hot lead into his blood. But Hooper told him it had passed through leaving an open, ragged wound.

The sun climbed high above them. Beyond the windscreen there was no horizon. The salt stretched away to infinity, curving up like the lip of a saucer to merge with the heat haze curtaining the sky. The big tyres drummed monotonously on the hard surface. The suspension creaked and juddered over patches of corrugation. Outside the truck nothing lived, nothing moved. The needle of the speedometer quivered just below fifty but there was no sensation of speed. It was as though the truck were standing still, rattling and shaking in the dead heart of an empty world.

'It isn't true, you know,' Hooper said.

Drifting in a mist of pain and heat, Blade heard him as if from a great distance. 'What isn't?'

'What they say about Manchester.'

'What about it?'

'It doesn't. Not all the time.'

'Doesn't what?'

'Rain.'

'Oh,' Blade said. He sat up, settling his shoulder more comfortably.

'It only rains in the summer,' Hooper said. 'In the winter it snows.'

Blade grinned gratefully. He knew what Hooper was doing. Talking was an affirmation of identity in the pitiless waste of salt. A means of survival. A safety-valve to stop the mind from blowing. Like men adrift in a life-raft on the emptiness of the sea, they needed to talk. Anything, however trite, however foolish. Just to hear a human voice.

'Rhubarb and custard,' Hooper said.

'What?'

'D'you like it?'

'Do you?'

Hooper nodded. 'Brought up on it. Sunday tea. Cold meat, brown bread and butter, rhubarb and custard.'

'No,' Blade said. 'I don't like it.'

'That's the trouble with you southerners,' Hooper said. 'No taste for real food. My mother always wears a silk dress Sunday afternoon.'

'Now that,' Blade said, 'I like.'

Hooper grinned. 'Hope for you yet then, isn't there?'

They stopped twice to top up the radiator. Immediately the flies fell upon them. The water in the bag hung on the front bumper was warm. Hooper poured it carefully into the header tank and screwed down the cap. At the second stop he also put a quart of oil into the engine.

Blade got out that time and went round the back of the truck. His feet felt strangely detached, moving uncertainly and without reference to his mind. Against the savage white glare coloured motes of light floated in front of his eyes. He held on to the tailboard and blinked his head clear.

Finch and Race had stripped off their overalls and were sitting on the bedrolls in their underpants, socks and boots. Their bodies glistened with sweat and were patched with flies clinging thirstily to the skin. Their eyes were hollow, sunk into their heads, their lips cracked and crusted. Only Marak still trussed in his blanket seemed unaffected by the heat. He stared blankly at Blade, his eyes unfocused.

They drank some water and swallowed a couple of salt tablets each. The heavy sweating was draining their strength. Even Hooper was lethargic now, sweat like rain in the stubble of his hair. Finch slapped the flies off his chest and shoulders. 'Bloody filthy brutes,' he said. 'Let's get cracking, Skip.'

Let's get cracking. Good show. Roll on. All the silly, casual clichés. Words for the sake of words; sounds without meaning in that elemental desert. But human sounds. Echoes of another world where green things grew in the shade.

Blade looked at Race. 'You OK, Tom?' A silly question.

'Great,' Race said, giving a silly answer. His eyelids were drooping, his face drawn under the mask of dirt. 'Bit dopey.'

'I've given him some codeine,' Finch said. 'Still got some left if you'd like a couple, Skip? Ease the old head a bit.'

Blade said, 'Not yet, Chaff. Thanks.' He heard his own voice but it was the voice of a stranger. The brave lieutenant refusing pain-killers, saving them for his men. He was acting out a fantasy now; *Boys Own Paper* with overtones of Sapper. They all were. All of them with their ridiculous nicknames. Hoop, Chaff, Skip. And Race, the uncomplaining, steady-the-Buffs hero. Cast in two-dimensional roles, caricatures in a serial where men jested at danger, died with their boots clean and were resurrected seven days later in time for the next instalment.

What else could they do? No European could absorb the bitter reality of the salt into himself. Insignificant in the endless, aching wastes, his strength corroded, his mind bleached and brittle, how could he escape except by escaping from himself? Not into himself, as the Bedu did, but out of

himself. Defying the arid truth by assuming an alter ego at once magnificent and absurd.

Blade walked back to the cab, feeling the earth tilt under his feet. Behind the wheel, Hooper grinned, his eyes weary in his sweat-streaked face. 'Dear mother,' he said. 'It's a bastard.'

'Dear son, so are you,' Blade said, completing the old, worn joke.

'Here goes bloody nothing,' Hooper said and put the truck in gear.

They came off the salt at 14.50 hours, behind schedule and off-course. There was a wadi leading up into the red sand country of the Jebel Menakib. Halfway up it, Blade sensed its unfamiliarity, knew they were too far east. But by then they were committed; off the white hell of the salt, lacking the will to go back on to it.

At the top of the wadi the dunes rolled away into the distance, a vast red-gold sea of sculptured waves, the sand blowing like spray off their crests. Hooper turned west, drove a little way along the trough between two crests and stopped the truck. He and Blade sat silent, staring bleakly through the windscreen. This should have been their moment of triumph, the salt behind them, the promise of Orange Patrol at last within reach. But they looked at the smooth-curved, velvet menace of the sand sea and felt only depression and a great weariness of the spirit.

Finch brewed up and opened tins of half-cooked sausages. They were too tired to fry them, their stomachs no longer interested in food. They ate the sausages straight out of the tins, biting through the waxy skins, chewing the soft paste inside.

Marak would eat nothing, refusing even a biscuit. They freed his hands and arms from the blanket, tied his wrists loosely and gave him a mug of tea. He sat in the truck, staring back the way they had come, morose now, no longer defiant. He had nothing to say to them, nor they to him.

Blade watched him with a kind of envy. This was the

Bedu's secret, the philosophy of kismet. With it they endured incredible pain, thirst, hunger; the howling nightmare of the khamsin – the sand-storm; the bitter poverty of the desert camps. Isolated in a kind of spiritual hibernation, Marak's breathing was slow, his movements minimal, his mind shrunk to a pin-point of consciousness deep within his body. He was no longer afraid of death, for in a sense he had already died.

After they had eaten, Finch set up the radio and Blade called Base. He gave their estimated position and their amended ETA at the rendez-vous east of Laila. He hoped something was getting through to Zubair. The intense heat on the salt had weakened the batteries. When he switched to RECEIVE there was only a faint crackle of static.

They rested for half an hour and then pushed on. Finch took over the driving. The sand was firm on the floor of the trough and they made good progress. After the aching glare of the salt the softer colours of the sand dunes soothed their eyes. Blade felt the return of hope and began to feel better. His head was clearer now, the shooting pains in his neck less vicious. But the fingers of his left hand were beginning to swell and he found he could no longer close his fist. He told himself it didn't matter. They were over the worst and every mile brought them nearer to Orange. He listened to the steady thrumming of the tyres on the sand and relaxed.

But it was too good to last.

Just before 16.00 hours they hit trouble. Finch stopped the truck, got down and walked on ahead. The soft sand lay in a long streak across their route; fifty – maybe sixty – yards wide. On the outward journey they would have taken it in their stride. But now . . . .

Finch and Hooper unrolled the steel-mesh track and Blade drove the truck one-handed, cursing his useless left arm as he sat and watched the two men sweating and struggling, calf-deep in sand almost as liquid as water. After the nightmare of the salt, the fight in the wadi, the long night's drive, track-laying was mind-numbing as well as back-breaking.

It took them nearly forty minutes to cross. A quarter of an hour later they hit another soft patch. It was 17.50 and almost dark when the truck lurched up on to firm ground – the bed of a wadi running in on their left in a north-west direction. Finch and Hooper were moving like zombies, their bodies plastered with red mud, their breathing harsh, their eyes raw and sweat-inflamed. While they were fastening the track in place behind the cab Blade walked forward, testing the ground with his heel. The wadi was narrow, the dunes rising steeply fifty feet on either side, but its bed was hard and stony; an ideal driving surface. He turned and looked back, trying to fit the curve of the wadi into the map in his mind. Superficially it looked right. But it didn't feel right. There was something alien about it; a sense of betrayal. Like a quiet road leading to an ambush.

He went back to the truck and climbed in beside Finch. 'OK, Chaff. I think we're right this time.'

'Yeh?' Finch said dully. Under the dirt his face was grey with fatigue. 'You reckon?'

Blade nodded. 'From here on it's a piece of cake.'

'I hope so, Skip.' Finch let in the clutch. 'I bloody well hope so.'

'You'll see,' Blade said. Sitting high in the cab behind the headlights, the warm, oily smell of the engine in his nostrils, the familiar dashboard in front of him, he almost believed what he was saying.

But breasting a short rise ten minutes later they found the way blocked by a drift of sand lying thickly on the wadi floor where a dune had collapsed. Blade looked at it in despair. The sand rippled like a lake in the glare of the lights, long and wide and obviously deep. Finch opened his door and made to get out, moving sluggishly like a drugged man. Blade put a hand on his arm in a gesture of defeat mixed with apology. 'No, Chaff. Forget it.'

'But . . . .'

'We've had it,' Blade said flatly. 'I'll try to raise Base and tell 'em where we are.'

'And just where the hell are we, for Christ's sake?' Finch said.

Something in his voice touched Blade with an icy finger. He said, 'Nearly home. I'm damned sure this is the right wadi. And Orange is coming down it towards us like there's no tomorrow.'

'Bull,' Finch said. 'We're adrift and you bloody know it.'

'No. We may be a bit off-course but . . . .'

'A bit?' Finch's voice rose, grating like a rusty hinge. 'We're bloody miles out. Even if we weren't, how the hell could Orange get to us through that lot?' He stabbed his finger at the sand lake. 'Pick up the trucks and bloody carry the bastards?'

'They'll get through,' Blade said doggedly. 'An eight truck patrol can get through any damned thing.'

Finch looked at him and laughed; a hard, cracked laugh with no mirth in it. 'Talk bloody sense,' he said bitterly. 'You know damned well what that stuff's like. About as stable as water. Jesus Christ couldn't walk over it much less get a truck through it.'

Blade said levelly, 'Get a grip, Chaff. Panic's not going to get us anywhere.'

'We aren't going any-bloody-where,' Finch said. 'What's the good of sitting here kidding ourselves? We haven't a hope of . . . .'

Hooper's head appeared at the window beside Blade. 'Cut the lights,' he said urgently. 'We've got company.'

They grabbed their stens, cut the lights and were out on the sand, crouching in the lee of the truck, in a matter of seconds.

'Where?' Blade said.

Hooper jerked his head. 'Behind us. On the right.'

'How many?'

'Just one. So far.'

'Decoy?' Blade said.

Hooper shrugged. 'Tracking down the slope. Upright. Waving his arms. What d'you think?'

'Got to be a come-on,' Finch said, steady-voiced now, himself again. He dropped flat and squirmed under the truck. Lying with his sten gun in his hands he stared upwards, searching along the silhouetted crest of the dune on the far side of the wadi, searching for shadows moving against the white blaze of the stars. Send one man in from the right to focus attention. Attack in force from the left. It was an old Bedu trick.

Down on one knee behind him, Blade said, 'Anything?'

'Not yet.'

Hooper reached into the cab and took a torch out of the locker behind the passenger seat. Blade cocked his sten, forcing the swollen fingers of his left hand over the magazine. 'Let's have a little insurance, Chaff.'

Finch raked the crest of the dune with a long burst. When the clip was empty, Blade said, 'OK, Hoop.'

The beam of the torch sprang out, reaching back down the wadi behind the truck. Nothing. Hooper swung it to the right and upwards, found the crouching, white-clad figure and held it. The figure rose slowly to its feet, hands held high. 'Oh, please. Don't shoot. Don't shoot.' A high-pitched voice, dry-throated, hoarse with fear.

'Jee-zus,' Hooper said. 'It's a bint.'

7

'You had no warning?' Blade said.

The girl shook her head. 'The engine just died on us.'

'It happens.' An electrical failure, a tiny piece of flawed steel, the human error element.

'Yes,' she said. The words were like steps between them, tentative, exploratory.

'So you pancaked?'

'Yes.'

They had given her a mug of hot tea laced with rum and she sat on the running board of the three-tonner, slim and vulnerable in crumpled white flying overalls. Her face was pale under the sweat-streaked dirt, her eyes dark-circled and huge, dilated with shock. Grey eyes, Blade noticed, with just a hint of blue in them. And her hair was black, cut in a page-boy bob.

Good-looking, he decided. Not pretty, good-looking. Fine-boned, full-lipped, high-breasted. He visualised her newly-bathed, in crisp, white uniform, supervising a ward. A black-stockinged mother-figure; perhaps the basic sex symbol.

'When?' he said.

'Eleven this morning.'

Eight hours ago. Eight hours of sun and flies and silence. And the withering of hope.

Blade said, 'And the others?' Knowing the answer; knowing too that it was important she should talk about it. Drain

the shock out of her system with words. And tears, if she had any to shed.

'Dead,' she said flatly, staring out into the darkness beyond him, remembering the pilot and the other nursing sister who had been sitting beside him in the cockpit of the Anson. Remembering his desperate fight to hold the plane in the air, put it down on the dunes in one piece. The weaving, sluggish approach. The bite of the harness straps into her flesh when they hit the sand. The terrifying grinding and splintering as the Anson began to break up around them, ploughing crazily along the crest of the dune, shedding a wing, cartwheeling down into the trough.

'You're sure of that?' Blade said.

She looked at him then, her eyes bleak. 'I am a nurse, y'know.'

'Yes,' he said. 'Of course. I'm sorry. Can you give me their names?'

She told him and he wrote them down on the message pad slotted on to the side of the transceiver, slipped the headphones over his ears and called up Base. Finch had hooked the set into the truck's heavy-duty battery and reception was excellent. Blade gave their estimated position.

'Roger, CATCHER.' The voice in the headphones was bland, imperturbable. An English garden-party voice, incongruous in the black wastes of the desert night. And enormously comforting. 'You're a touch adrift, old son.'

'More to the point,' Blade said, 'we're bunkered in a deep wadi blocked by a sand fall.'

'Are you now? Well, not to worry. Orange are on their way. Less than fifty miles from you now.' The cheerfully casual words undermined his anxiety as they were meant to do. 'They're calling us every twenty minutes and damn the expense. We've got a rough fix on you. I'll vector 'em in.'

'Thanks.'

'All part of the service, old son. OK for water and grub?'

'Roger.'

'Flares? Ammo?'

'Roger.'

'Piece of cake, then. Marak still with you?'

'And somebody else now.'

'Yes? Who?'

'A girl called Pat.'

There was a brief, incredulous pause. 'Say again.'

'Pat Holland. Sister Holland. Posted to 63rd General, Cairo. From Karachi. W.E.F. 08.00 today.'

'A nurse?'

'Check.'

'For God's sake, Jack. Is this some sort of a joke?'

'Negative.'

'What the hell's she doing out there?'

'Drinking tea, actually,' Blade said, neatly mimicking the casual drawl. 'The Anson she was in pranged about a mile from here.'

'Good God. What about the pilot?'

'He bought it. And the other passenger.' Blade read their names off the message pad, saw the girl tense. 'Get a signal off to Karachi, will you?'

'No MAYDAY sent?'

'No time.'

'Roger. Will do. Lucky you found her.'

'For us, too,' Blade said, looking at his swollen left hand, feeling the throb of poisoned veins in his armpit. But it was she who had found them. Seen the headlights tunnelling along the wadi. Begun to run through the clinging, treacherous sand with no hope of ever catching them if the wadi had not been blocked.

'She's OK, is she?'

'In every sense of the word.' Blade smiled up at the girl. She smiled back; a small, slightly glassy smile. But a smile. A beginning.

'Down, boy. You'll be into your Red Shadow act next.'

Blue heaven and you and I and sand kissing a moonlit

sky . . . . Blade grinned wryly. The reality was a little different. 'Just get those idle bastards in Orange down here a bit sharpish,' he said.

'Roger. Give 'em till 20.50 and then start transmitting a homing signal on 1500 metres. OK?'

'Will do.' Blade switched off the set and hooked the headphones over it. 'Everything's under control,' he said, looking at the girl. 'Let's eat.'

Finch had the pressure stove going on the sand in the lee of the truck, cooking a stew of steak, potatoes and soup – all out of tins. The smell was cordon bleu. As Blade stood up to get his mess tin he heard a jackal call in the near distance, thought of the bodies in the wrecked Anson and swallowed hard.

They ate standing up, using the tailboard as a table. There were tinned pears for pudding.

'I'll have mine without custard,' Hooper said.

'The custard's off,' Finch said. 'You'll have to have 'em without cream.' It was an old joke between them, brought out at least once every trip.

Marak refused to eat.

'Stroppy bastard,' Finch said. 'What's up with him now?'

'Must be your lousy cooking.' Hooper ran his fingers round the inside of his mess tin and licked the gravy off them noisily.

'Charming,' Finch said. 'And what about your table manners? Enough to turn anyone's stomach.'

'Not mine,' the girl said. She bit into half a pear, holding it in her fingers, the juice running down her chin. There was colour in her cheeks now, a new warmth in her eyes. The hot meal was working its little miracle, bringing her back to life. The food and the sense of belonging engendered by the clumsy gallantry of Finch and Hooper whose presence comforted her the way a rough blanket comforts on a cold night. CATCHER had adopted her, made her one of the family.

But not Race. He stood a little apart, eating in silence. As

if he, not the girl, were the stranger. Watching him, Blade felt the old worries nagging again. He told himself it was probably just shyness on Race's part. Life in the DPG was monastic. You became unused to women, uneasy in their company. They belonged to another world. A world of memories and dreams. Unreal. Out of reach. In a curious way, unwanted. You forgot how different they were, how necessary. After a time, you were happier without them.

But he knew it was more than that with Race. Something stronger, more positive. A hard, unyielding resentment. Why?'

He felt in his pocket for his watch. He had taken it off earlier when his wrist and arm had begun to swell. It was 19.00 hours. 'OK,' he said. 'We'll give 'em till 21.00 and then send up a flare. And one every ten minutes after that. Where's the pistol?'

'In the cab,' Hooper said. 'I'll get it, Skip.'

'No,' Race said quickly. 'I will.'

Hooper watched him limp off. 'What did I say, for Christ's sake?'

'Nothing,' Blade said. 'He's tired, that's all.'

'Aren't we all?' Finch said and stretched his arms. 'Any chance of getting our heads down, Skip?'

'I don't see why not,' Blade said.

Finch and Hooper hauled the bedrolls out of the truck and laid them on the sand against the foot of the dune. They put a sten gun fully-loaded beside each bed. 'What about you, Skip? Manage a sten with that arm?'

Blade shook his head and patted his revolver in its holster. 'I'll use this.'

Pat Holland looked at the sling on his left arm. 'I think I'd better hold a sick parade.'

'Not now,' Blade said. 'We'll wait for Orange. They'll have a full medical kit.' He smiled at her. 'Give you something to work with.' The truth was he was scared to have her take off the dressings. Light-headed with tiredness and pain, he had

the strange conviction that if the bandages came off his arm might come off with them.

Hooper said, 'Who's on first stag, then?'

'I am,' Race said, re-appearing round the truck with the Verey pistol and a box of flares. He put them on the sand beside Finch's bedroll. 'I've done damn-all today except write off a truck.'

'That's true,' Finch said.

Race glared at him. 'Sister Holland can use my bedroll – if she doesn't mind?'

'What about the leg?' Blade said.

Race shrugged. In the light of the inspection lamp his eyes were hard, with just a touch of the old arrogance. 'No problem. Besides, I'm not tired.'

But Blade was. Desperately, dizzily tired. He found himself blinking to keep his eyes open. Hooper and Finch were out on their feet, yawning hugely. The girl too. Race was the obvious choice to stand guard.

Blade nodded. 'OK.' There was a faint, warning voice somewhere in the back of his mind, suspicious, uneasy; triggered perhaps by that flash of arrogance, the hard, include-me-out resentment in Race's eyes. But he was too done to heed it. 'Thanks, Tom. Wake me at a quarter to nine. Earlier, if you see or hear anything. Anything at all. Right?'

'Roger.' Race took his sten gun from beside his bedroll and stood with his back to the tailboard, watching as they squirmed down into their blankets. When they were settled he switched off the light.

Blade lay on his back with the girl on his right, between Hooper and Finch. His left arm was heavy across his chest, his right hand on the butt of his revolver. Sleep washed over him like water, as if he were lying in a warm bath. The night air was cool on his face, the breathing of the girl already slow and deep. He smiled tiredly. She was tougher than she looked. Accustomed to death, of course. Ward duty had taught her that. He turned his head slightly, eyelids drooping, and saw

Race's figure silhouetted against the stars. Heightened by the perspective he looked like a tree. Solid. Reliable. In spite of his odd ways not a bad sort of . . . . .

When the truck backfired his brain interpreted it as a rifle shot. He sat up abruptly, sliding back against the wall of the wadi. His revolver was in his hand and cocked before his eyes opened. The wound in his shoulder stabbed him fully awake. On either side of him Finch and Hooper were thumbing the safety-catches off their stens, rolling over in their blankets to lie prone on their stomachs, eyes wide open, staring into the treacherous, starshine dark.

The girl sat up and said sleepily, 'Are they here already?'

'Down,' Blade said. 'Lie down.' The black bulk of the three-tonner was missing, leaving the wadi wide and empty. He could hear the sound of the engine perhaps half a mile away and growing fainter.

'The mad bastard,' Finch said. 'He's gone and scarpered.'

'Flare,' Blade said.

Finch raised his arm and squeezed the trigger of the Verey pistol. The flare went up with a whoosh, exploded and hung in the air, brilliantly white. In front of them the desert sprang into sharp focus; an eerie pattern of highlights and black shadows, silent, frozen, like a projected monochrome slide. The sand of the wadi floor was grooved where the truck's tyres had scored it. The tracks ran away down the slight slope to disappear into the darkness beyond the range of the flare now decaying quickly in its downward drift. The sound of the engine, very faint now, came back to them intermittently.

'You know what he's bloody done, don't you?' Finch's voice was barbed with anger. 'Let her roll back in neutral as far as she'd go before he started her up. Then whipped the bugger round and put his foot down.'

'What the hell's he playing at?' Hooper said thickly, drunk with sleep, shaking his head like a bear to clear his brain.

'I don't understand,' the girl said. 'Is something wrong?'

Blade said, 'What's the time?'

Hooper looked at his watch in the last light of the flare. '20.00, just gone.'

They closed their eyes when the flare died, waiting for the after-image to fade and their night sight return. And opened them again to darkness.

Hooper said, 'You don't reckon Marak got loose? Jumped Race and . . . . ?'

'Hell, no,' Finch said. 'Marak's still trussed-up in the back of that truck wondering what in hell's happening. You can bet your Sunday boots on that.'

Blade knew he was right. They had left Marak's wrists tied, pushed his hands down inside the blanket again and bound his upper arms firmly. Roped like that from ankles to shoulders he had no hope of taking Race.

'You mean he's run out on us?' Pat Holland's voice was flawed, jagged with incipient panic. Two crises within twelve hours were two too many. 'Left us here without water or . . . .' She sat up abruptly, her breathing quick and unsteady.

'It's all right,' Blade said. 'We've got blankets, flares – everything we need until Orange gets here.' He put his right arm round her shoulders, felt the trembling of her body under the thin overalls.

'He's round the bend.' Finch's voice was half-pitying, half-contemptuous. 'Has to be, hasn't he? Nothing else makes any bloody sense.'

Blade said nothing, remembering the days and nights of morose, withdrawn moodiness. The edginess in Race that had flared up so quickly, so unpredictably into aggression. The blind panic that morning on the beach when the fifteen-hundredweight had dug itself in. It all added up to one thing: the classic desert malaise. A combination of fatigue and nervous tension they called 'round the bend'. Or was there something more? Some twisted, ulterior cause? And if so, what?

'If the Maaruf cop him with Marak on board,' Hooper said, 'they'll sit the poor bastard on a stake in the sun and watch him die, God help him.'

Blade felt the girl shudder.

Finch said, 'What about another flare, Skip? The dark gives me the twitch.' But it was not just the dark. It was the loss of the truck. Finch without a truck was suddenly, astonishingly incomplete.

The girl pressed herself against Blade and he held her close. His hand touched the softness of her breast and he made to move it but she reached up and held it there with her own. Her hair brushed his cheek. In another place, at another time it would have been an invitation. But he knew it was not that. Only an instinctive gesture of trust and need; the comfort-seeking act of a child in the dark. But the darkness was their friend. The only cover left to them.

'Not yet, Chaff,' he said.

'Aw, c'mon, Skip,' Finch said, his voice plaintive, almost wheedling. Unnerved by the short sleep, still strung up tight with fatigue, he was beginning to fray round the edges.

'Forget it,' Blade said.

'You dunno who's out there,' Finch said doggedly. 'They could be . . .'

'There's nobody out there,' Hooper said. Solid, unflappable Hooper. 'And if there is, they can't bloody see us.' He hawked and spat phlegm. 'Get a grip, Chaff, mate, for Christ's sake.'

The girl stirred in the circle of Blade's arm. He felt his body, too long celibate, respond instinctively and took his arm away with an effort of will. 'OK, let's get organised.' The curtness in his voice was a rebuke to himself.

They re arranged the bedrolls so that the girl was lying behind them against the foot of the dune. They sat in a shallow arc, shoulder to shoulder, shielding her, Blade in the middle. The girl's hand crept into the small of his back, her fingers hooking into his belt.

I'm just a security symbol to her, he thought. Just a teddy bear. And felt vaguely disappointed.

Used to the darkness now, they could see the line of the dune crest across the wadi. They watched it with aching eyes, lonely and helpless as miners trapped at the bottom of a pit shaft. The darkness wrapped itself round them, drawing them together, dissolving their individual fears into a common sense of dread. Finch said quietly, 'Sorry, Skip.'

'Forget it.'

'It was finding the truck gone, see? Shook me rigid.'

'I know,' Blade said acknowledging the loss, sharing it. The truck was everything. Shelter, mobility, life itself. Without it they were crippled. He nursed his left arm in the sling, cold now in spite of the fire in his shoulder. He listened to the scrape and rustle of the loose sand blowing off the dunes; a surprisingly loud noise in the night. And menacing. As the desert was menacing and the night that covered it. He was acutely aware of the precariousness of their situation. Two stens and a revolver. No spare ammunition. No water. No transport. No radio to beckon Orange to them across the sand. And the added complication of the girl.

The time crawled by, a worm in the flesh of their morale. There was nothing to do but wait and listen. At 20.30 he told Finch to fire another flare. They lay flat as it arched and hung against the stars, floating down slowly. Nothing moved around them. The dunes were silent, smoking in the wind, empty of life. The wadi stretched away, a tunnel to nowhere. As the flare died they sat up and watched the western sky. There was no answering flare.

'Come on, you bastards,' Finch muttered. 'Get your bloody fingers out, for Christ's sake.' In spite of the crudity of the language it was a prayer.

Amen to that, Blade thought.

Five minutes later they heard it. A sobbing, snarling murmur that grew up quickly under the sigh of the wind and broke through it. The three men looked at each other in the

starlight, knowing what the noise was, feeling the hair prickling on the backs of their necks in a primitive, instinctive response.

'That's all we need,' Hooper said disgustedly. 'That's all we bloody need.'

'What is it?' The girl's voice was shrill, a cicada-like whisper.

'OK, Chaff,' Blade said. 'Let's have a flare ready.'

'For God's sake,' the girl said. 'That noise. What is it?'

'Jackal pack,' Blade said, making his voice deliberately laconic.

Canis aureus – the golden dog. A prick-eared, long-bodied brute with teeth like knives, bone-crunching jaws and a thick, rough coat the colour of sand at sunset. A carrion eater. By himself, a coward slinking in to feed on another's kill between the kite and the hyena. But in a pack, with hunger in his belly, dangerous . . . .

The pack ran as one, flowing over the desert like a swift, dark current towards the Anson, drawn up-wind towards it by the scent of the bodies trapped in the wreckage. Finding it, they began to build up as water builds behind a dam wall. They were puzzled by the sharp stink of petrol, goaded by the rich smell of blood. They moved like shadows as the light faded, fluid and silent now, but for the panting of their breath, testing the air, ears twitching with nerves, eyes bright and greedy. Building and breaking apart and building again, waiting for that moment when greed overcame fear and the dam burst.

It took them nearly half an hour to reach that point. Whimpering softly in their throats they watched each other in the gathering darkness, looking for the one who would breach the wall of fear. There had to be one. A leader. When he went in, the rest would follow, tear at the bodies with him, pull him down in a frenzy if need be to get at their share

of the meat. And all the time the greed grew within them, griping their guts, eroding their fear, filling their mouths with saliva which hung from their open jaws in thick, silvery ropes.

When the leader finally cracked his fear and made his move the whole pack thrust after him, sucked into the Anson like water down a pipe. There in the shattered cabin of the plane they ripped and fought and gorged in a nightmare of flies and blood and torn flesh, killing two of their number, eating them along with the human bodies, crunching bones, gulping blood and gristle and the pale, slimy snakes of the intestines.

Lying up on the dunes afterwards they licked the blood off their paws, their appetites whetted but not satiated. Hungry and restless still, taunted by the after-taste of flesh, the lingering smell of blood, they began to cast about, picked up the girl's trail and in an instant were in full cry again, running with muzzles close to the sand, sounding that high-pitched, blood-freezing hunting call that made them once more a brotherhood, a single-minded entity – the pack.

The explosion of the flare froze the jackals. They crouched on the ridge of the dune above the wadi, ears flattened to their heads, eyes glittering under the hard white light that hung above them.

'Oh, dear God, look at them,' the girl said softly, her voice starred with the hair-line cracks of panic.

Blade gave his revolver to Hooper. The big man held it in both hands, arms at full stretch, sighted it carefully and squeezed the trigger. The heavy calibre bullet took one of the jackals in the head between the eyes, smashing open the skull, spraying blood and brains. The big dog reared up and fell over sideways, legs flailing wildly in reflex action as the heart pumped its last.

The flare snuffed out abruptly. In the ensuing darkness the

three men and the girl huddled together on the wadi floor listening to the pack fighting over the carcase, tearing it to pieces in renewed frenzy.

'That'll hold the buggers,' Hooper said and handed back the revolver.

But not for long, Blade thought. That's a big pack. Twenty, twenty-five. They've been at the Anson. They won't stop now.

He could feel the girl trembling against his back, hear the breath sobbing in her throat. 'How many flares left, Chaff?'

'Three in the box. One up the spout.'

It was not enough. Orange was all of thirty minutes away from them yet. Maybe more. If they were to survive that long they needed light. A fire.

As if reading his mind, Hooper said, 'Burn the blankets, Skip?'

'Have to,' Blade said bitterly. 'There's damn-all else to burn in this bloody wilderness.'

They wrapped one blanket round the girl's shoulders. The rest they shook out and piled loosely on the wadi floor in front of them. They threw on two of the groundsheets, keeping the other two in reserve. Hooper scooped out a hole in the sand under the blankets and half filled it with small stones. Finch crouched with the Verey pistol aimed at the hole.

Up on the dune the jackals were quietening. Blade saw their shadows beginning to disperse, pulling away from the bloodied bones of the carcase, growling and snuffling as they loped up and down along the ridge staring hungrily into the black pit of the wadi, scenting more food there. One of them squatted on his haunches, lifted his head and howled at the sky. The girl jerked, shivering.

'It's all right,' Blade said. 'They sound worse than they are.'

'All shout and no guts,' Finch said.

Except that it was dark and they had tasted blood.

Suddenly the line of the ridge was smooth, unbroken by

black shapes. Blade heard a quick scuffling along the wadi to his left, knew the jackals were coming down the side of the dune. Knew, too, that others would come down in a separate bunch to his right. 'OK, Chaff,' he said. 'Light the fire.'

The flare stabbed down at an angle into the hole, buried its nose in the stones and blazed up into the blankets. The thick, woven material was filmed with grease from their bodies. It caught at once, the flames leaping up to lick at the groundsheets. In the flickering light the men looked up and down the wadi. The pack had split, the two groups edging out along the far side, making a kind of flattened semi-circle round the fire. They stood with their heads down, uneasy, suspicious, afraid of the heat and the dancing flames. Hooper raised the muzzle of his sten.

'Not yet,' Blade said quickly. Every minute was precious now. Every unfired round an insurance against the time when the fire went out.

The blankets and groundsheets were burning fiercely. Too fiercely. The three men sat with the girl tucked in behind them against the wadi wall, the heat of the fire on their faces, their nostrils clogged with the smell of burning rubber mingled with the rancid stench of the jackals.

The girl said tautly, 'That fire's not going to last long.'

'Long enough,' Blade said shortly. She was not telling them anything they did not already know. But she was putting their thoughts into words. And that was bad.

The jackals were belly-crawling now, inching in towards the fire, greed giving them a kind of boldness. The girl stared at them, her eyes wide with terror. The firelight distorted the crawling shapes, magnified their size, multiplied their numbers. It seemed to her that the wadi was full of them.

'What happens when the fire burns out?' she said, compelled to put her fear into words, afraid of the answer she might get.

'We shoot a few,' Blade said easily. 'Keep the rest

occupied.' But he knew it would not be that simple. When the fire died they would be in trouble.

'Trouble?' Hansell said. Flight Lieutenant David Hansell, OC Orange Patrol; a big, fair-skinned man in his twenties, built like a prop forward, blue-eyed, capable. And at that moment, worried. He was sitting beside his sergeant in the passenger seat of the fifteen-hundredweight with the headphones clamped over his ears.

'Could be.' The voice of the Base operator was carefully neutral through the headphones. 'You're not receiving them. Nor are we. Their radio's probably on the blink or something.'

Or something, Hansell thought grimly. At night in the desert any one of a dozen things.

'Stay on your present course,' Base said. 'You should be up with them inside twenty minutes. Over.'

'Will do. They got flares? Over.'

'Roger.'

'OK. Orange out.' Hansell flicked the switch to RECEIVE, leaving the set open, and pushed the headphone off his right ear. 'Looks like we've got ourselves a blind date,' he said to the sergeant. 'Base confirms no radio contact with CATCHER.'

The sergeant nodded, concentrating on his driving. Ahead of them the wadi floor was bleached by the headlights, the hard-packed sand stitched with stones. The beat of the engine drummed back at them off the high dune walls. The truck squatted on its suspension. They were driving hard, running against the clock, apprehensive.

'Mr Blade knows his survival drill, Skip,' the sergeant said.

'Right,' Hansell said. And thought: he's also wounded. And so is Race. And they've got Marak. And that's like walking through a gunpowder store with a lighted match in your hand.

He turned in the bucket seat and looked back. The trucks

of his patrol were spaced out behind, thundering down the wadi, lights blazing. 'OK,' he said. 'We'll swap places in ten minutes. I'll drive. You take the Brownings.'

The jackals were close now, each end of the semi-circle curving in to make a horseshoe round the dying fire. Tongues lolling, ears pricked, they were whimpering, spooked by the flames, excited by the smell of the girl's fear.

Finch picked up one of the reserve groundsheets and looked at Blade. Blade nodded. Finch threw the groundsheet on to the fire. In the few long seconds before it caught there was darkness in the wadi. A darkness alive with movement and the sound of panting breath. The whimpering of the pack swelled suddenly, pitch and volume rising to the shrill crescendo of the full-throated hunting cry.

'On your feet.' Blade's voice was hoarse, urgent. 'Up. Up.'

They stood, pressing the girl back against the dune wall, shielding her with their bodies. The howling of the jackals beat like wings about their heads, smoke from the charring groundsheet oily in their nostrils. Hooper swung his boot, kicking the fire, lifting the groundsheet. Air rushed in under it. Flames leaped like life renewed, illuminating the pack. They were bunched together, eyes and teeth gleaming, poised to run in behind the leader.

Big and rangy, his chest hair matted with dried blood, the leader had already begun his run, coming in straight towards the fire. The sudden burst of flames caught him in mid-leap. Legs stretched, jaws gaping, back arched like a bow, he seemed to hang in the air shoulder-high, a black, snarling shape above the blazing groundsheet.

The girl's shriek was cut short by the stutter of the sten as Hooper fired from the hip. The bullets all but severed the jackal's head, shattering his shoulders, opening the great jugular vein. The great dog crumpled and fell, dead when he hit the fire. The intense heat from the burning rubber singed the hair off his belly and flanks, shrivelled and split the skin.

His blood and body fluids hissed and steamed as his stomach burst, spilling his intestines on to the blaze. There was a pungent smell of burnt hide and roasting meat.

Behind him the pack faltered, cowering back, muzzles lowered, tails stiff with fear. The fire gathered strength, sizzling round the carcase, giving the survivors of CATCHER a few more minutes of life.

Blade looked at his watch.

Finch said, 'Flare, Skip?'

Blade hesitated. With the fire so bright again he was reluctant to waste one of the three remaining flares. On the other hand, Orange had to be close now, might easily miss them without a flare to pin-point the wadi. He nodded.

Finch loaded the Verey pistol, raised his arm above his head and squeezed the trigger. The jackals flattened, snarling, on the sand, cowering under the brilliant light.

'There they are, Skip.' The sergeant was standing, legs braced wide apart, on the steel deck of the fifteen-hundredweight. He had the canvas covers off the Brownings, his hands locked on the pistol grips. 'Ten o'clock.'

Behind the wheel of the truck Hansell glanced up at the flare. 'And about a mile?'

'Or less.' Behind them the trucks were hooting as the drivers spotted the flare. He had to shout to make himself heard.

Driving one-handed, Hansell reached under the seat and pulled out the Verey pistol ready-loaded. He waited a moment until the flare died, then fired, angling the pistol a little to project the flare towards CATCHER. The dunes sprang sharply into focus. Ahead, the wadi curved, banked with shadows. He saw the headlights swinging left as the bonnet of the truck came round, like twin magnets seeking the pole star of the flare. Saw the break in the smooth line of the dunes about four hundred yards ahead where the sand wall had collapsed. And the rippled lake of sand flooding the

wadi, humped in the centre like a bore in an estuary. He was braking hard as the flare went out. In the black darkness beyond the reach of the headlights CATCHER's fire glowed dully, silhouetting the crest of the hump. 'No wonder their radio's out.' Hansell shouted. 'The bloody truck's on fire.' He whipped the gear shift into neutral, yanked on the handbrake and grabbed his sten gun. The patrol halted behind him. He swung his feet out on to the sand. 'OK. Let's go and have a shufti.'

The sergeant jumped down off the steel deck and together they ran to the edge of the sand lake and began to wade through it up the slight incline. The fine-grained sand was fluid as water, pouring into their boots as their feet sank into it. Three yards from the crest they went down on their stomachs and elbowed their way to the top.

The sergeant sucked in his breath. 'Bloody hell.'

Below them the wadi was a pit of heaving, snarling bodies as the jackal pack surged in towards the little group pressed against the dune wall behind the dying fire. The mindless baying of the big dogs rose about them in a crescendo of fury. Through it Hansell could hear the thin, high screaming of the girl. He cocked his sten, held the muzzle low and fired a long burst.

Down on the wadi floor Finch saw the jackals leaping and whirling, turning on each other in savage terror as the bullets smashed into them. The fire was almost out now, providing little light and no protection. At any moment the maddened pack could engulf them. He slammed another flare into the pistol and fired it horizontally into the mass of struggling bodies. Beside him, Hooper's sten was in action, panning across the wadi. The flare burst into life, thrusting deep into the close-bunched pack, setting two or three of them on fire before it buried its nose in the sand and stuck fast, spraying out globules of blazing chemical. Terrified by the flare and the murderous bullets the jackals went berserk, fighting over

their own dead, slashing and ripping at each other in an orgy of blood lust and fear.

Up on the crest Hansell and the sergeant had been joined by others from the patrol. They were standing up now, spaced out in an arc that reached round on to the dune above the three men grouped round the girl. Bullets from their stens scythed long swathes through the jackals, driving them back upon themselves, savaging the writhing bodies like iron teeth.

Finch fired another flare, angling it high and forward this time. The white light hung above them illuminating a scene of cataclysmic horror. The hard, quick yammering of the guns, the demented howling of the jackals, the burning, bloody carnage on the wadi floor – all this was highlighted, like something out of Dante; a maelstrom of terror on the lowest floor of hell.

By the light of the flare Hansell led his men down into the wadi. Leaping and sliding through the slippery sand they maintained a continuous, devastating fire, driving the remnant of the pack before them. Before the flare had burned itself out the last jackal was dead.

Blade was down on one knee, his good arm holding the crouching girl. 'It's all right, Pat,' he said as the guns stopped firing. 'It's all over now.'

8

'You mean he just up and left you?' Hansell said. 'Just like that?'

'Just like that,' Blade said.

'No warning? No explanation?'

'None.' Or had there, perhaps been a warning, a series of warnings? Observed but unrecognised.

'Good God.' Hansell shook his head. 'Well, he won't get far tonight, that's for sure. This wind's going to blow hard before morning. Chances are he's within ten miles of us now, snugged down in the lee of a dune, waiting for daylight. We'll nip out first thing after breakfast and pick him up. Marak too. No problem.' He had this knack of making everything sound straightforward. Easy, even.

Blade nodded wearily. They were sitting in the back of one of Orange's three-tonners drinking hot tea laced with rum. Outside, the wadi was alive with noise and lights. Orange had come in full patrol strength. Two fifteen-hundredweights, six three-tonners. Hansell and his sergeant and thirty-two men. A private army engaged now in laying track over the sand lake and burning the bodies of the jackals on a huge petrol fire.

'He wasn't to know,' Blade said then. 'About the jackals, I mean.'

'No.'

'If he'd suspected they were about he wouldn't have pulled out and left us. I'm sure of that.'

'Maybe.' Hansell lit two cigarettes and gave one to Blade. 'How's the girl?'

'Asleep. Out to the wide. Parrin's given her a knock-out pill.'

'Parrin?'

'He's my medical orderly.'

Blade sipped his tea, his vision beginning to blur a little round the edges as reaction began to set in. 'She's all right,' he said.

'Sure. She's fine. A good night's sleep and she'll be . . . .'

'No,' Blade said. 'I mean, she's . . . .'

'I know what you mean, Jack,' Hansell said. 'How's the shoulder?'

'Not bad. More a nuisance than anything else.'

Hansell nodded, looking at the swollen fingers of Blade's left hand protruding from the sling and not much liking what he saw. 'I'll get Parrin to . . .'

'In the morning,' Blade said.

'OK.' Hansell saw the tiredness in Blade's face. 'Odd, though, Race taking off like that.'

'He got the twitch. Could happen to any of us.'

'Yes.' Hansell sounded doubtful. 'There's this business about his wife, of course. You know she's ditched him?'

'I didn't know that,' Blade said. He had never thought of Race as being married; as being the marrying kind.

'Got herself shacked up with one of these smooth characters in a reserved occupation. Essential war work. Backbone of England. Coining money and home every day at five sharp.'

'Had a letter, did he?' Blade said. There were beginning to be too many such letters now as the war dragged on. Ill-spelled letters jagged with broken dreams. Inarticulate epitaphs of marriages that had never had a chance, written on cheap, lined paper, sealed without a loving kiss.

'Not from her. From her solicitor.'

'For God's sake. Out of the blue?'

'Apparently. One week all sweetness and light. The next, damn you Jack, I'm inboard.'

Blade winced. 'Unimaginative bitch.'

'That kind mostly are. Poor sense of timing, too. It came a couple of days before you took CATCHER out.'

Which explained a lot. The moodiness, the raw nerves, the get-off-my-back arrogance. Blade said, 'Why the hell didn't he say something?'

'He did. To Alec Squires.'

'Who told Father?'

'Who told nobody. Not then, anyway. Race wouldn't let him.'

'Damned fool,' Blade said. Rhys-Smith wasn't called Father for nothing. He looked after his crews, was jealous for their welfare. He would never have sent a man in Race's disturbed condition on an operation as dicey as CATCHER. 'What time are you leaving in the morning?'

'Five.'

'I'm coming with you.'

'With that shoulder?' Hansell shook his head. 'Not a good idea.'

'I'm coming,' Blade said. It was suddenly important to him. Something he owed Race; to be there when they caught up with him.

'Look, Jack. Don't be such a tiger. You've done your share. We can cope with the loose ends.'

'CATCHER's my show, Dave. What's left of it.'

'And Race is your responsibility. Is that it?'

'You'd do the same in my place.'

Hansell hesitated. 'It's all right, y'know. We'll go easy with him.'

'I'm coming,' Blade said flatly.

Hansell saw the determination in his eyes, the stubborn set of his jaw. 'OK, if that's what you want.' He got down out of the truck. 'Better get some sleep then.'

'You'll wake me?'

'Yes, of course. Just before five.'

Blade peered at him, his eyes red-rimmed and heavy-lidded. 'I mean it, Dave.'

'I know,' Hansell said.

He came in at four-forty-five the next morning with a thin, wiry-haired corporal. 'I've brought Bill Parrin to have a look at that shoulder.'

Parrin nodded and opened a medical haversack. He unbuttoned Blade's overalls and drew them down off his shoulders, easing the left arm carefully out of the sleeve.

'Bill's halfway to being a vet,' Hansell said pleasantly. 'Gen man on the staggers, colicky cows and anthrax in battery hens.'

Blade managed a small grin. 'How is he on swine fever?'

'Willing,' Hansell said. 'Ignorant – indeed, pig-ignorant. But willing.'

Blade's grin twisted into a grimace of pain as Parrin peeled off the sand-clogged dressing and bared his shoulder. In the light of the inspection lamp slung over one of the tilt frame bars the wound was a dark hole, its torn edges white and puckered and oozing yellow pus and dark blood. The infection branched in puffy, purple veins down the arm to the hand with its grotesquely swollen fingers the colour of raw beef. Parrin sucked in his breath and felt under Blade's armpit with gentle fingers.

'Well?' Hansell said.

Parrin shook his head. 'It's a mess. Septic as a wog sewer. The glands in his armpit are like a bunch of unripe grapes.'

'Never mind the Harley Street flannel,' Blade said, the sweat glistening on his forehead. 'Just clean it out and strap it up.'

'I shouldn't,' Parrin said. 'All that'll do is drive the infection deeper.'

Blade glared at him, his eyes milky with pain. 'Strap the damned thing up out of the way and give me a couple of pain killers. I'll be OK then.'

Parrin looked at Hansell.

'I dunno, Jack,' Hansell said. 'It doesn't look too good to me. Maybe we ought to get Pat Holland to look at it. She's still sleeping but . . . .'

'For God's sake,' Blade said. 'It's only a flesh wound, damn it. Anybody'd think my bloody arm was dropping off.'

'It might just do that,' Parrin said.

'Bull,' Blade said.

'It's that bad, Bill?' Hansell said.

Parrin nodded. 'He ought to be in hospital right now. Even then it'd be dodgy. In this climate septicaemia isn't something you shrug off with a dab of iodine and a bottle of iron tonic.'

'Look,' Blade said tightly. 'We're a good two days from Base. Another two or three hours aren't going to make that much difference. Just fix it so's I can go out this morning, all right? When we get back with Race and Marak I'll bed down in here and you can do what the hell you like with it.'

Parrin hesitated. 'Are you giving me an order, sir?'

'Yes, Corporal, I bloody well am,' Blade snapped.

'I hear you, sir,' Parrin said.

Blade managed a sketchy smile of apology. 'I'm sorry, but this is important to me, Bill.'

'OK,' Hansell said. 'Do what you can to make it comfortable for him.'

Parrin swabbed out the wound with disinfectant, dusted in sulpha powder and applied a clean sterile dressing. He packed cotton wool into the armpit, positioned Blade's left hand just below his right shoulder and strapped the whole arm firmly against his chest. He eased the overalls up and buttoned them over the bandaged arm, tucking the empty left sleeve neatly into the belt. 'That's the best I can do,' he said doubtfully, not happy about it.

'Fine,' Blade said. 'Feels good.' Immobilised like that the shoulder was certainly easier. He was conscious of a dull burning sensation which spread down only as far as his

elbow and left his swollen hand ice-cold. But there was no real pain. Yet.

Parrin made him swallow three pethidine tablets and gave him six more to take with him. Hansell looked at the bulge under his overalls and grinned. 'You look about five months gone.'

Blade glanced down. 'Carrying it rather high, wouldn't you say?'

'Just so long as you don't lose it,' Hansell said and immediately wished he hadn't.

There was bacon for breakfast, with biscuits soaked in hot fat. Blade got one mouthful down and gagged. He stood by the tailboard of the truck, gulping sweet tea, sweating a little in spite of the fresh morning air. After a minute or two the pethidine began to take effect and he felt better.

Hansell wiped his mouth and swilled out the dregs of his tea. 'Ready?'

Blade nodded. 'Let's go.'

He rode in the passenger seat of the fifteen-hundredweight. Hansell was driving, Hooper sitting on the rear deck, legs braced, shoulders wedged against the gun mounting. Finch was riding in one of the two three-tonners behind.

'No need for you two to come,' Hansell had said. 'We can manage Race.'

'The hell with him,' Finch had said. 'It's Marak we want. And Marak's CATCHER's meat.'

The first rays of the sun were rimming the dunes with pale gold as they rolled slowly over the tracks into the lower wadi, past the burned-out pile of bones and ash that was all that was left of the jackal pack, heading east-south-east, back towards the salt. The cool air washed like water over the bonnet of the truck. Blade drank it in gratefully and felt his head clear.

'Last lap for CATCHER, then,' Hansell said.

And please God, Blade thought, it'll be a short one.

The wind in the night had scoured the surface of the desert,

sweeping away the soft layer of top sand on the wadi floor that had slowed them the previous day. They came to the place where the wadi turned right and followed the slope, running almost due south now, the dune walls towering above them. Just before six they ran out of the mouth of the wadi not, as they had expected, on to the salt but on to a narrow shelf a hundred and fifty feet above it. The ground was hard, rock-ribbed, strewn with small stones. Lying on the stones was a spade.

Blade felt the tension knot in his stomach. 'Exhibit one,' he said.

Hansell stopped the truck. The three-tonners halted behind, spaced out, spreading the target. Hooper pulled the covers off the Brownings and cocked them. Hansell and Blade got out and walked to the edge of the escarpment. The sand slanted down steeply to a strip of beach beside the salt. Even this early in the day the flat white glare was dazzling.

'If he's out on that stuff,' Hansell said, 'he's had it.'

But Blade was looking to their left along the foot of the cliff. Half a mile along there was a tumbled fall of red rock. Between it and them, half-buried in the glittering salt crust, the burned-out wreckage of CATCHER's three-tonner told its own grim story.

'Damned fool,' Hansell said unemotionally. 'Pushed on in the dark, lost his bearings and went over the edge.' He shook his head. 'A truck full of petrol and ammo. Never had a prayer, poor devil.'

Blade swallowed, seeing it all nightmare-vivid in his mind. The wadi thick with flying sand. The headlights probing the black, swirling curtain. The speed building up as the gradient grew steeper. The moment of blind panic when the front wheels ran off the edge of the shelf and the truck somersaulted down into the darkness below.

'What the hell did he think he was doing?' Hansell said. 'Only a blind, bloody fool would've pressed on through that blow last night.'

Or a man at the end of his tether, Blade thought. He said, 'He was twitched. I told you. Could happen to any of us.' The pethidine was beginning to wear off. Pain and disappointment made his voice irritable.

'Yes,' Hansel nodded curtly. 'You said.' But his voice disowned Race, rejected any kind of association with him.

They climbed back into the truck and drove on slowly for a hundred and fifty yards. Ahead of them now the shelf was blocked by the rock fall. Hansell circled his hand above his head. The three trucks followed each other round in a U turn and stopped. 'Seems quiet enough,' Hansell said. 'But you never know.'

His sergeant posted men along the crest of the dune above and behind the shelf, put Finch behind the wheel of the fifteen-hundredweight and took over the Brownings from Hooper. It was all second nature. The trucks parked for a quick getaway, the sentries posted, the fighting vehicle manned by experts. On such details life depended in the desert.

Hooper picked up his Lee Enfield and the spade out of the fifteen-hundredweight and started down the steep slope of the cliff with Hansell and Blade. The sand was soft, already warm in the sunlight, crumbling under their feet as they half-slid, half-waded down to the wrecked three-tonner. The truck was almost unrecognisable; just a twisted, blackened skeleton. Hansell prodded part of an exploded petrol tin with the toe of his boot. 'Nothing here worth talking about.'

But there was something. Lying on the salt two or three yards from the truck on the far side. Two shrivelled lumps of burned flesh and charred bones. Not men. Not even the corpses of men. Distorted black wire puppets that could as well have once been animals. Except that beside one of them, where the head had been, were two identity discs, RAF issue, guaranteed fire-proof.

'Hell's teeth,' Hooper said softly, almost reverently. 'The

poor daft bugger.' And it was, in its way, a not unfeeling epitaph.

Hansell stooped, picked up the discs and rubbed away the greasy soot with his thumb. Etched into the surface, the letters and figures were clear: 1473362 RACE T D. And on the other side: C OF E. He looked at Blade. 'That's it, then.'

'Yes.'

'Killed in the drop. Or smashed up and burned alive,' Hansell said and gave him the discs. 'Either way it's a helluva way to go.'

'Yes.' Blade held the discs in his hand; two small pieces of asbestos compound the size of pennies. It wasn't a lot to show for twenty-odd years of living.

'At least it solves his wife's problem,' Hansell said.

'Yes. Yes, it does, doesn't it?' But if that was the reason, why had he taken Marak with him?

Hooper dug a shallow trench at the edge of the salt and half-shovelled, half-scraped the remains into it. Standing in a haze of flies by the open trench with the spade in his hand and his rifle slung over his shoulder he looked up at Blade. 'You want to say something, Skip?'

Blade clenched his fist hard over the discs. What was there to say for the frizzled horror in the trench? The Lord's Prayer? The Twenty-Third Psalm? Ashes to . . . . ? 'Go with God,' he said slowly. It was the traditional Bedu farewell but he spoke the words in English, not Arabic. They were for Race and only for him. For Marak he had no words at all.

Hooper began to fill in the trench. Blade watched him dully. The bite and slur of the spade in the salt sounded unnaturally loud like a snare drum in the silence of the desert morning. He felt the weight of his left arm dragging at his shoulder. His mind began to float as the pain seeped back, a returning tide, washing away the pethidine. He started to compose a letter in his mind: Dear Mrs Race, you can call off your bloody solicitor. Your husband's in a lonely grave at the world's end and will no longer be troubling you with . . . .

The Bedu came round the foot of the rock fall at a run, pounding bare-footed over the salt towards them, yelling and firing from the hip as he ran. The rifle kicked in his hands, the bullets flying high and wide, the range much too long. Blade and Hansell went down on one knee beside the wrecked truck and drew their revolvers. Hooper dropped the spade and crouched in the half-filled trench, his boots crunching bones, his rifle at the high port across his chest. On the shelf above them the engine of the fifteen-hundredweight coughed into life.

The Bedu was perhaps two hundred yards away now, running hard, yelping in a high-pitched voice shrill with battle hysteria. Blade and Hansell held their revolvers at arms-length, muzzles down, waiting for the range to shorten. A bullet ricocheted off the twisted girders above them and buried itself in the sand inches from Hooper's head. Finch was backing the fifteen-hundredweight towards the edge of the shelf to bring the Brownings to bear, the sergeant shouting directions to him.

The range was closing fast now. Blade brought his revolver up slowly, sighting on the running Bedu's chest. Ninety yards, eighty, seventy. Hooper stood up in the trench. The Lee Enfield seemed to grow out of his right hip. He bent his knees slightly to absorb the recoil, swung the rifle across and up and squeezed the trigger. As he did so, the Bedu leaped high, both feet off the ground and still running. The yelping shout died in his throat, cut off abruptly as if a switch had been thrown. The rifle flew out of his hands and he somersaulted in the air, came down solidly on his right shoulder, rolled twice and lay still.

Hooper worked the bolt of his rifle, looked up at the sergeant on the rear deck of the fifteen-hundredweight and shouted, 'Cover me.'

The sergeant waved an acknowledgement, traversed the Brownings and began to spray the ground beyond the fallen Bedu, working away from the body towards the rock fall.

Hooper stepped out of the trench and walked forward, Blade and Hansell beside him.

The Bedu lay on his back, arms out-flung, mouth and eyes open. The flies were already thick on his face. His right leg was smashed just below the knee where Hooper's bullet had taken him as he leaped. But the reason for his leap and the cause of his death only became apparent when they turned him over. A shot fired from behind him had struck the bandolier strapped round his waist; struck it in the small of his back causing three of the bullets slotted through the leather belt to implode. There was a hole in his back big enough to take a man's two fists.

The Brownings stopped firing as the belt ran out. The three men by the body crouched instinctively, looking along the furrowed salt towards the rock fall. In the sudden silence they could hear voices, the metallic jingle of harness, the thud of camel pads. They braced themselves, staring at the tumbled rocks, waiting for the mounted Bedu to burst into view and ride them down.

But nobody came. The sound of the camels was fading. The Bedu were riding away. They waited a few moments and then stood upright. The Brownings fired a short burst as the sergeant tested the new belt and then fell silent. From beyond the rock fall a small dust cloud rose, eddied and drifted away.

Hooper said, 'Want me to go and have a shufti, Skip?'

'No point,' Blade said. 'They've pulled out. Best part of a mile away by now.'

Hansell turned the Bedu's body over with the toe of his boot and brushed the flies off the dead face frosted now with salt. 'Know who he is?'

Blade shook his head. 'Not one of Marak's lot.' He pointed to the distinctive striped burnous. 'He's a bin Rashid. Raiding party out from Sabakha, probably.'

'Bags of guts, but short on sense,' Hansell said.

'Aren't they all?'

They began to walk back towards the wrecked truck.

'Shot in the back by his own people,' Hansell said.

'Yes.'

'Odd, that.'

'Or prudent,' Blade said. The pain in his shoulder was in full flood now, a black, burning tide flowing through his body, drowning him. He took three pethidine tablets out of his pocket and tried to swallow them. But his mouth was too dry. He crunched them between his teeth and forced them down, gagging a little on the bitter taste.

'They didn't want to tangle with us?' Hansell said.

'Something like that. Saw us arrive. Got greedy. Thought about it. Decided against it.'

'But chummy there couldn't resist chancing his arm.'

'Right.' It was the logical explanation. The sort of thing that happened all the time. Life was cheap in the desert. Loyalty tenuous. Bedu killed Bedu as casually as they killed Europeans. So why was there something wrong, nagging at his mind now cloudy with pain? Race's desertion, the burned-out truck, the pathetic, gruesome relics on the salt – these things teased his brain like an anagram. An anagram he had thought he had already solved. Now he was less certain. Was there, perhaps, another solution, less obvious, but more significant? His fingers touched Race's identity discs in his pocket and insisted that there was. But he was too weary, too involved in fighting the pain to puzzle out what it might be.

He waited with Hansell until Hooper had finished filling-in the trench. There was no wood to make even a rough cross to mark the grave. They could drive the spade in upright, but it would inevitably be stolen. Hooper found a large stone and set it carefully over the narrow mound in the salt. It was the best they could do. And at least the jackals would not disturb it. There was nothing under the stone for them.

An hour later the three trucks crawled in low gear across the sand lake and rejoined Orange in the wadi. The patrol was packed and ready to move out. As the trucks came off the steel tracks the crews were already lifting and stowing them.

Blade climbed into the back of the three-tonner and lay down gratefully on the blankets. Parrin came in with the girl. She looked rested and astonishingly trim in spite of the stained overalls. She had washed her face and brushed out her hair and to Blade, seeing her hazily in a blurred aura of fevered light, she was altogether beautiful. He managed a smile of sorts. 'Hi, Sister.'

'Hi, Skip,' she said, her answering smile masking the shock she felt at the feebleness of his voice, the deep lines of pain etched into his stubbled face. 'How's it going?'

'OK.' Blade licked his lips with a furred tongue. His skin was dry and burning, the ache behind his eyes an echo of the throbbing furnace in his shoulder.

She nodded briskly, professionally. 'Let's have a look, shall we?'

Parrin unstrapped Blade's left arm. The swelling was much worse, the veins dark and angry under the puffy skin. When he touched the dressing on the shoulder, Blade gasped. Parrin looked at Pat Holland, his eyebrows raised in query.

She shook her head. 'Leave it for now.'

They made him as comfortable as they could, packing the blankets round and over him, straightening his arm so that it lay along his side. Pat soaked a handkerchief in water and folded it on his forehead. Blade smiled gratefully. His eyes closed. He started to mutter in the onset of delirium.

Parrin got out of the truck and said to Hansell, 'There's nothing much we can do, Skip. He needs a hospital and he needs it damned quick.'

Hansell nodded. The temperature in the wadi was over the hundred and twenty mark, the air round the trucks dancing with flies. He thought of the long, empty miles that lay between them and the Base hospital at Basra. 'You'll ride with him, Bill.'

Pat Holland looked down over the tailboard. 'We both will,' she said.

'Yes,' Hansell said. 'Thanks.' And he ran down the line to his fifteen-hundredweight.

They drove right through the rest of that day and on into the darkness, laagering at nineteen hundred hours, cooking a meal, bedding down on the open desert. By the light of the inspection lamp Parrin and the girl examined Blade's shoulder, easing off the pus-sodden dressing, wrinkling their noses when the smell hit them. In the sweaty heat of the truck the poisoned flesh was rotting quickly. The whole area of the wound was now a mass of suppuration, welling pus and dark, discoloured blood. The arm was enormous, the hand almost black, swollen so that the skin was tight and shiny on the splayed, stiffened fingers.

Looking in over the tailboard Hansell said, 'Dear God, what a mess. Will he lose that arm?'

'Better off without it,' Parrin said. 'I'd whip the damned thing off myself if I had the equipment. He's bung full of poison and this bloody fever's eating him alive. If it doesn't break soon he's had it.'

Hansell looked at Blade's face. The eyes were deep-sunk now, the nose thin and sharp. Pat was dressing the wound, her hands gentle, skilled, her eyes serious. She glanced across at Hansell and shook her head.

'Do what you can for him,' Hansell said, for something to say. 'We'll leave at first light.'

'Why not now?' Pat Holland said.

Hansell shook his head. 'Sorry, Pat. The next hundred miles or so are tricky. We need the daylight.'

'How long after daybreak before we reach Base?' she said.

'Seven hours. Maybe less if we push it.'

She turned her head and looked him full in the face. 'Then you push it,' she said evenly, quietly, but with great force. 'You damned well push it.' And added, with a quick, apologetic smile, 'Skip.'

Hansell grinned. 'Will do.'

They were up at three-thirty, moving just after four,

crawling through the treacherous, pre dawn darkness, headlights blazing and to hell with any Bedu raiders who might be watching. Hansell called up Base, gave his ETA and asked for the M.O. and an ambulance to come out along Z track to meet them.

In the back of the three-tonner Blade was singing. The singing was in his mind. All that came out of his mouth was a series of hoarse, incoherent noises. But in his mind he was singing gloriously; all the songs of his childhood curiously interwoven with the songs he had sung on the bomber squadron and in the Mess at Zubair. Lulu the Zulu put the kettle on with Polly. Salome was dancing to Cherry Ripe. Eskimo Nell went to Strawberry Fair and got those Shaiba Blues.

He was walking across a field of buttercups towards a blue lake. There were trees by the lake. Real trees, English trees. And the sun was shining and he would have been completely happy except that he was carrying a heavy sack in his left hand. The sack grew heavier with every step he took, pulling at his arm and shoulder. He stopped singing and tried to put the sack down, but as soon as it touched the ground its mouth opened and a hand came out and seized his wrist. Not a normal hand. A charred and grisly claw that had once belonged to Race. All that was left of Race was in the sack mixed up with Marak's remains. He trembled with loathing at the touch of that hand and tried to shake it off. But the more he shook it, the tighter the hand gripped him . . . . .

'Hold him, Bill,' Pat Holland said. 'Keep him still if you can.'

Parrin nodded, sitting behind Blade's head, his hands pinning Blade to the blankets. Blade was thrashing about in delirium, the fever raging through him, wasting the flesh of his face and neck, coating his lips with grey-white scum . . . . .

The sack was very heavy now, dragging him down the slope of the field towards the lake. He was kicking it, shaking it, fighting to get free of it. But the bony claw was clamped

round his wrist and the sack seemed to come alive, swinging itself ahead of him, forcing him to run after it down the slope. And the slope was getting steeper and he was running faster and faster. And the water in the lake below him turned black, waiting for him, beckoning to him, hungry for his life . . . . . .

Pat was wiping the fevered face with a handkerchief soaked in a mess-tin of water. Blade's eyes were open, fixed and bright, unseeing. His breathing was shallow and rapid, his breath foul. It took all Parrin's strength to hold him . . . .

The sack plunged over the edge of the field into the black lake and he pitched forward after it and went down into the water. The water was ice-cold yet strangely it scalded his skin. He struck out with his right arm and his legs, struggling to swim. But the weight of the sack pulled him down and down, into the freezing, burning water, into the dark, writhing weeds . . . .

They passed the Halfway House just after seven, travelling fast now, the big trucks hammering over the hard-packed sand of Z track, trailing a plume of dust two miles long.

Parrin looked at the girl. 'Last lap,' he said. And to Blade, 'Hold on, Skip. Nearly home now.'

But the words meant nothing to Blade. They were just the gurgle of water in his ears. He stared up at Parrin without recognition, seeing his face as a vague pale circle, rippling and wavering, the disc of the sun looming faintly through the black water. He kicked his legs despairingly in the tangle of blankets, believing them to be the weeds that were holding him fast. The weeds and the sack which had now hit the bottom of the lake and was sinking into the mud. Oddly, the child's voice was still singing in a corner of his mind where they were changing guard at Buckingham Palace while a nightingale sang in Berkeley Square. And all the time he was gasping for air, upside down in the cruel water, anchored by that fleshless claw welded to his left hand . . . . . .

Parrin held him firmly round the waist as his back arched

in a final, desperate attempt to free himself and float to the surface. He strained against the medical orderly's grip, lips drawn back from his teeth in a rictus of panic, eyes screwed up tightly. But the dead hand of Race refused to let him go. The pressure of the water was squeezing his ribs, forcing the last vestiges of air out of his lungs. The mouth of the sack was a black hole gaping in the slimy beard of weeds. He felt himself being swallowed down into it. He opened his eyes in terror and saw Parrin's head above him. Saw it not as Parrin but as Marak, the grotesque, sweat-streaked face upside-down against the canvas tilt of the truck. As his mouth opened in a silent scream and his muscles went slack one tiny corner of sanity in his mind puzzled over the riddle of death by drowning in the sand wastes of a waterless desert.

He was in the sack now, head-first, the mouth beginning to close over his feet. He was conscious of a curious sound, faint and lugubrious as the hoot of an owl. A sound that came from outside the nightmare reality of the lake and the sack and the grisly, clutching claw. A sound that swelled, ripping open the canvas sack, driving down to touch him, lift him, promise him the gift of life. But it was too late. Too late. And the sound stopped abruptly, leaving him in blackness and darkness as the five senses of his body shut down .....

Standing by the open rear doors of the ambulance, Rhys-Smith and the M.O. saw the plume of dust flying like a ragged banner against the morning sky, heard the chorus of horns as the drivers of Orange held their hands flat on the buttons and announced their arrival. The two men looked at each other, grinning with relief. The wavering image of the leading fifteen-hundredweight suddenly appeared out of the dust half a mile away down the track.

'They made it, Doc,' Rhys-Smith said.

The M.O. nodded, hearing the anxiety under the satisfaction in the Wing Commander's voice. 'Let's hope they're in time,' he said.

9

Pat Holland giggled. 'Ophelia March-Browne.'

'With an E?' Blade said.

'But of course.'

'A name to remember. Who was she?'

'Junior mistress. She took us for art, nature study and body mechanics.'

'Body what?'

'Mechanics. Sort of Greek dancing. Very classical, very pure.'

'So I should hope.'

She smiled. 'We used to drift round the gym in loose cotton shifts and Alice bands dreaming of Sadlers Wells.'

'With the lovely Ophelia whooping it up on the piano?'

'I thought she was gorgeous,' Pat said. 'I was twelve at the time and heavy with puppy fat. And she was tall and willowy and anaemic. And I adored her.'

'Which reminds me,' Blade said. 'Will you marry me?'

They were sitting on the terrace of a cafe above the beach at the eastern end of the Corniche in Alexandria. It was early afternoon, the sunlight bland on the blue water, the sand in the little bay below them warm and white. He had forgotten that sunlight could be kind, sand clean. That people could sit like this, relaxed and easy at tables spread with blue and white checked cloths and drink beer and iced coffee and eat little cakes filled with cream. There were tubs of flowers set among the tables. The waiters wore long white galabeyahs

and red tarboushes and had round, serious faces the colour of café-au-lait. The cups and saucers were delicate, fragile in his hands. It was like a dream, unreal, enchanting, difficult to cope with. It made him feel clumsy, a Gulliver in some Lilliputian micro-landscape. Only Pat was real. Pat in her summer dress and sandals talking about her childhood.

'What did you say?' she said, startled.

He looked at her across the table, seeing her as if for the first time. The black gloss of her hair, the smooth skin of her face and arms, the promise of her figure under the thin dress, the candid, suddenly serious eyes. He realised he had been wrong about her eyes. They were blue, not grey. Cambridge blue. Like an English April sky. 'I want to marry you, Pat,' he said.

'Oh.'

He grinned. 'This is so sudden?'

'It is a bit,' she said.

'I'm prepared to ask you properly,' he said. 'Down on one knee, hand on my heart.'

Her eyes widened. 'Here?'

'Here. I love you, Pat.'

'I know.' She spoke quietly under the murmur of voices from the tables around them. The way she spoke in bed. Her voice created a place for them both, private, intimate.

'And you?' he said.

She smiled, her eyes shining. 'Do you really need to ask that?'

'Well, then?'

'No.' She shook her head. 'No, Jack.'

'OK,' he said. 'You need more time. I understand.' But he didn't. Eight days they had been together by the sea. Eight days of sunshine and happiness, walking, talking, discovering each other, delighted with what they had found. Eight days and seven nights. A lifetime. The little flat overlooking the harbour which Hansell had organised for them through a naval friend. The cool breeze after dark. White sheets on the

bed luminous in the starshine. Her arms holding him. Whispered words. Hands and lips skilful in love. A kind of innocence, a kind of frenzy. A kind of peace.

'It's not that,' she said carefully, looking for the right words, not wanting to hurt him. Not wanting to lose him either. 'I've had all the time I need.'

'For what?'

'To know,' she said. 'To be sure I love you.'

'So?'

'Please, Jack. Let's not spoil it now.'

He felt his need of her sharp like a thorn; pressed it deliberately into his flesh, relishing the hurt. 'But it's no?'

She nodded.

There were some children on the beach playing at the water's edge. He watched them, his head turned away from her, from the barrier she had raised. 'There's nobody else, is there?'

'You know there isn't,' she said, wounded by the question. As though the thorn had pricked her too.

'Do I?' He turned back to her. 'I know that what we've had together this week's been much more than just . . . .'

'Sex?' She nodded. 'Much more. And that's why I can't . . . .' She saw the bewilderment in his eyes. 'I'm not making sense to you, am I?'

'Not really, no.' He looked at the sweet curve of her mouth, the rounded chin, the level-browed eyes. It was all there in her expression, open, almost defiant; her need of him matching his need of her. The hand of his love slipped comfortably into the glove of hers. Everything about her was right; how she looked, the quickness of her mind, the welcome of her body. Only what she was saying flawed the moment; a tear in the lining of the glove. 'We've still got three days,' he said then. 'We can be in Cairo tonight. See the chaplain first thing in the morning. Get a special licence. The day after tomorrow we can be married. In the cathedral. Flowers. A cake. Everything laid on. They've even got a wedding dress you can hire.'

'Have they?' She felt a pricking behind her eyelids.

'If that's what you want,' he said. 'Is it?'

She blinked in a dazzle of sunlight fractured by unshed tears, brilliant as the stones in a ring. 'Church wedding, white dress, a bouquet? Yes. Oh, yes. I want all that.'

'But a different bridegroom, presumably?'

She shook her head. 'The one on offer's fine.'

It was a life-line and Blade grabbed it. 'Are you saying you . . . . ?'

'I'm still saying no, Jack.' And the line went slack, sagging between them. 'We get married, have one night together. Then what?'

'Ah,' he said. 'So that's it.'

'You in Saudi, me in Cairo. Separated.' She shook her head. 'I don't want that. I don't want that one little bit.' She was an only child. A doctor's daughter rooted in the security of a happy marriage. She had been brought up to believe that people were important to each other, that they were incomplete alone. Loneliness was the virus to fear; the cancer that disrupted life. And the anti-body was love. The love she had seen in the lives of her parents. Practical, strong, secure within its own self-perpetuating discipline. And love was tidy. Enormous and many-sided, but tidy. She understood that, liked it; everything laid out neatly like the instruments on a surgical trolley.

'We can write,' he said. 'Every day if you like.'

'Connubial bliss by courtesy of the APO? No, thanks.'

'There'll be leave.'

'Seven days every six months if we're lucky. No, it wouldn't work.'

'It works for other people,' Blade said and tried not to think of Race for whom it hadn't worked at all.

'Yes?' she said. 'But I'm not other people.'

'No,' he said. 'You're Pat.' He put his hand over hers and squeezed it. She smiled, the brilliance of her eyes lighting hope within him. 'It'll work, love. You know it will.'

'No,' she said. 'Another place, perhaps. Another time. But not now.' It was something her father had given her. A sense of timing. "A girl without qualifications is very vulnerable," he had said the night before she had moved into the Nurses Home to begin her training. Eighteen and pretty and never away from home before. "Don't fall for the first medical student who gives you the eye. Get your training behind you first." Her father had smiled. "As your mother would say, bread and butter first, then cake."

Blade said, 'After the war? Is that what you mean?' Where all the dreams waited, packed like cakes in boxes, to decay or mature.

'Then, perhaps,' she said. She hesitated, looking at him, wanting him; took a deep breath and nodded briskly, sure of herself. The way she nodded in the theatre when she slapped the scalpel into the gloved hand. 'Then, yes.'

Blade sat back comfortably and folded his arms. 'So. We're talking about – what? A few months. A year at the outside. It's not long.'

'No,' she said. 'Not long.' Three years training for her SRN. Two more nursing in military hospitals. What was one more year? She looked past him out over the flat blue sea. And it seemed suddenly, for the first time in her life, that the way ahead was uncertain. Because she needed him. Because he would not be there.

'Maybe you could organise a posting back to Basra,' he said. 'That'd be wizard.'

'That would be terrible,' she said. 'Seeing you every day. Leaving you every night at the door of the Nurses Home. Worse than separation.' She had seen too many girls caught in that trap. Living two lives, enjoying neither.

'OK, so we get engaged. There's a jeweller in the Rue . . . .'

'Not even that,' she said, the old discipline rustling round her like a starched apron, restricting her, protecting her, giving her identity. 'No ties. No strings.'

'Hell's teeth, Pat Holland,' he said, half-amused, half-annoyed. 'You're bloody stubborn.'

'Not stubborn. Afraid.' Of trapping him, of being trapped. 'People change, Jack. Oh yes – ' she leaned across the table, her breasts full and lovely under her dress, and put her hand on his mouth as he began to protest – 'they change. In a war even a month's a long time.'

She was right, of course. He knew that. War accelerated living, induced change. Everything slightly larger than life, brittle, subject to disaster. 'So we change together,' he said.

'Yes, but we wouldn't be together, would we?' she said. 'And that's what I want out of marriage. Togetherness. Right from the moment you put the ring on my finger.' It was what her parents had had; the right formula. The only one she was prepared to accept. 'What happens afterwards – the changes, the disappointments, the excitement – we share together or not at all.'

He shook his head. Inside his uniform he was still a student, living in the present, unconcerned about tomorrow. 'You're asking too much,' he said. 'In wartime separation's the name of the game. It's something we've got to accept, Pat.'

'No,' she said firmly. 'In love with you, unmarried, no strings – I can take that kind of separation. It's married separation I won't accept.' She smiled. 'Yes, I know. Other couples have to. And I've seen what happens to them.'

'Some,' Blade said. 'Not all.' He reached for her hand again. 'Anyway, we're talking about an engagement now, not marriage.'

'We're talking about commitment.'

'And you're not prepared to commit yourself?'

'I don't want to wake up one morning a year from now to meet a stranger off a train and say to myself, "This is my fiancé, the man I've promised to marry. I wonder what he's like now?" '

'A stranger?' She heard the hurt surprise in his voice. 'You can say that after that night in the wadi, those weeks in

hospital, the way things have been with us here?' He laid the memories on the table in front of her like proof of identity – passport, driving licence, a letter. 'We've already weathered more damned crises than most people meet in two years of marriage, a three year engagement.'

She looked at him, her mouth quivering. Wanting him. Aching for him. The memories were weapons directed not against her but against the defences she had raised in spite of herself. She thought of the nights she had sat beside the hospital bed in Basra, struggling to penetrate his fevered mind and implant the will to live. The crisis when the fever broke and he was back in the world of pain and weakness, thin and tired, entirely dependent upon her. But alive. The days of his recovery. The laughter they had used to cover his embarrassment over bedpans and bed-baths. The sudden solemn moments of tenderness surprising them both. The growing awareness of love, not yet put into words, endemic in the routine of temperature and diet charts.

And then the flight to Alex. Rhys-Smith seeing them off at the air-strip. His gruff, 'God bless you, chicos. Don't do anything I wouldn't do,' which was somehow as valid as an episcopal benediction. The flat above the harbour. The mornings swimming in the healing sea. The walks, the long conversations that gradually gave way to close-knit silences as their feelings outgrew the need of words. The bed waiting at the end of the day. The passion. The fulfilment.

All this they had shared, created, cherished. It was, she realised, very ordinary, shared by millions; and also quite unique, special to them. And it was a great deal to have. A good foundation. Too good to be spoiled by a jerry-built marriage in a hired dress in an alien city. A marriage thrown together in a single night, left vacant and deserted the following morning.

'I know what we have,' she said quietly. In the town where she had been born, among the circle of friends at the tennis club, it would have been natural, easy, almost inevitable. A

boy-meets-girl encounter leading gently to marriage, a home of their own, children. It was all she had ever wanted, her nursing career no more than a step along the way to it. Only the timing was wrong.

'But it isn't enough?' He was fighting doggedly, the way he had fought the fever in Basra. It was what she expected. What she wanted. And something she had to resist.

She shook her head. 'Try to understand, Jack. Please. We've had – we've got – too much.' The words were clumsy in her mind, broken echoes of her parents' philosophy, destructive of her dreams as fists thrust among the plates and glasses on the table. But part of herself, as unalterable as her bone structure, the chemical composition of her blood.

The words of a song rose mockingly in her mind. A song they had sung at ward concerts in the hospital at Karachi, nurses and patients, young girls and young men back from the jungle fighting, drawn together by pain and loneliness. People to whom too much had happened too quickly a long way from home ....

> Fall in love, fall in love,
> says my heart.
> It's romance, take a chance,
> says my heart.
> But each time that I'm
> almost in your arms,
> this old school-teacher's head of mine
> keeps giving me false alarms ...

But were they false alarms? Others had thought so, taken a chance and damned the consequences. But she had not been able to do that. Her upbringing, the values built into her personality, the way she had been moulded to cope with life – all these insisted the alarms were valid, warned her to heed them.

'Too much,' she said then, 'to risk spoiling it all now.' She

saw his eyes puzzled, resentful, willed him to understand. 'If it's as good as we think it is . . . .'

'It is,' he said. 'You know damned well it is.'

'Then we've nothing to worry about, have we? It'll keep. Always there. Ready for when we can use it properly.'

'Properly?' He frowned. 'What the hell's that supposed to mean?'

Not what you think, she thought. Going to bed with him in the flat had induced no sense of guilt, no after-taste of shame. Her inhibitions were emotional, not moral; to do with tomorrow, not today. 'You know what I mean,' she said.

'Do I?' His voice was curt, remote. He turned his head away, his mouth shut tight.

'Your bill, sir.' The waiter was standing beside him, the slip of paper folded on a plate.

She watched Blade pick it up and reach for his wallet. She bit her lip, her mouth dry. In her mind the song was pitying . . .

Then my head rules instead
and I'm wise . . . .

The waiter brought out a handful of small change. The piastres clinked on the plate. Blade shook his head. The waiter nodded his thanks. She watched him put his wallet away.

Oh you fool
that was love,
says my heart . . . .

Blade looked at her. 'So. That's it then,' he said.

'Yes,' she said, closing the door, but gently. Not locking it.

This is me, her eyes pleaded. Middle-class, tidy-minded, all-or-nothing me. The way I'm made. The way I love you. The only way I know how to love you.

But he was not looking at her now. He was staring down at the beach and the children playing. She waited for him to get up and walk away and leave her. The bill paid. The incident over. Expecting it. Resigned to it. That was love, that was love . . . .

He turned his head and smiled. 'OK, Sister Holland,' he said. 'We'll do it your way.'

She swallowed, dizzy with relief. She put her hand on his on the table, felt his fingers close over hers. It's all right, her heart said. All right. She smiled back at him, feeling the strength of his grip. Penicillin had done that. Penicillin and a saline drip, plasma, oxygen – all the armoury of round-the-clock intensive nursing. And what the MO called TLC – tender loving care.

'I hope you know what you're doing, my girl,' Matron had said. 'Getting emotionally involved with a patient – it's not wise, you know. Not at all wise.' But she had smiled as she said it.

'Thank you for asking me, Jack,' she said. 'Ask me again when . . . .'

'Yes,' he said, accepting it, in a strange way relishing the freedom it gave him, gave them both. Sure of her now. Content to wait. 'Meanwhile . . .'

'Ah,' she said. 'That's something else again.' She freed her hand, touched her hair, smiled at him, her eyes innocent, inviting. 'What time is it?'

He looked at his watch. 'Four. Just gone.'

She nodded. 'Y'know, it's a very odd thing. We've done nothing all day but walk a little and sit in this café.'

'So?'

'So why do I feel like bed at four o'clock in the afternoon?'

He grinned. 'Do you?'

'Don't you?'

He nodded. 'Must be the sea air. A little nap before dinner?'

'Of course.' She widened her eyes. 'What else had you in mind?'

He stood up, took her hand, pulled her to her feet. 'Come and see,' he said.

Three days later he took her down to Cairo. They had an early lunch at Shepheard's and rode out in a taxi afterwards to the 63rd General Hospital. She was in uniform. It made her look taller; no less feminine, but different. She took off her hat in the taxi and they held hands under it, their private world no longer inviolate, needing now to be protected. When the cab stopped outside the hospital gates she said, 'Am I being very silly about this marriage thing?'

'Yes,' he said.

She looked at him quickly, saw his grin and made a face. 'You'll write?'

'I'll write.' It was more than a promise; a kind of vow. 'And you?'

'Yes.'

Already they were moving apart. The desert and the wards were waiting.

'Take care of yourself,' she said, the banal words sharp with meaning, newly-minted on her tongue.

'You too.'

The words stretched between them, fragile as paper streamers from ship to shore at the moment of sailing. She kissed him and was kissed in return.

'Love you,' he said.

'Love you.' She put on her hat and got out of the car. Blade told the driver to wait and made to follow her.

'No,' she said, stooping a little, looking in at him, her face suddenly taut below the jaunty hat. 'Please, darling. Go now. Quickly, quickly.'

He caught the Comm Flight Anson at Almaza, touched down at Basra in the late afternoon, hitched a ride on the ration

truck and was back on Base at 18.00 hours. Already he was lonely. Already at home, where he belonged.

Rhys-Smith was in his office. He stood up as Blade went in and held out his hand. 'Good to see you, Jack. How was Alex?'

'Wizard, sir.' Which said nothing, and everything.

'Married yet?'

'Working on it, sir.'

Rhys-Smith grinned. 'She's a nice girl.'

'That too.'

The Wing Commander's good eye watched him shrewdly. 'Want a posting back up there?'

'Cairo?'

'That's where she is, isn't it?'

But she wasn't in Cairo as she had been in Alex. She was in the 63rd General, on the wards, on duty. It was not the same thing. 'No, thanks.'

'Glad to hear it. How's the shoulder?'

'Good as new.'

'No aches or pains?'

'Only when it rains, sir.'

Rhys-Smith grinned. 'You'll do. Come in for a drink before dinner. Yes?'

'I'd like that. Shop or gossip?'

'What? Oh, gossip. I want to hear all about Alex.' The good eye winked. 'And Pat, of course.'

Blade had a shower and put on a clean set of khaki drill. He was lacing up his boots when David Hansell put his head into the tent opening. 'Welcome home, you old one-armed bandit.'

'Dave. Come on in.'

Hansell sat smiling on the bed. 'Well?' he said.

Blade said, 'Well, what?'

'When do I get to be best man?'

'Ask Hitler.'

'Ah. Après la guerre, eh?'

'At a rough estimate one minute after cease-fire.'

'Good show. She's a nice girl, Jack.'

'So Father just told me.'

Hansell hesitated. 'Is that all he told you?'

'So far. He's asked me over for a natter. I'm just going.'

Hansell nodded.

'Why?'

'Nothing special,' Hansell said. 'Nothing he won't tell you himself when he's ready.'

Blade looked at him. It was not like Hansell to be evasive. 'Just a gossip, he said.'

'That's it then. Heard about Finch?'

'No?'

'Got his third stripe up.'

'About time.'

'Yes. Good chap.' Hansell stood up. 'See you later then. Goat stew and beans tonight.'

'Big eats,' Blade said. 'I can't wait.'

When Hansell had gone, Blade put on his hat and went down the lines to Rhys-Smith's tent. It was dark now, the air dry and cool. He felt the sand under his boots, looked up at the stars, heard the laughter in the tents, was content. He pulled the feel of the camp round him like an old coat, familiar, comfortable. Alex was like a letter in one of the pockets. Something to remember, look forward to. He reminded himself he must write to her later that night.

The Wing Commander waved him into a canvas chair and gave him a large whisky. He asked about Alex, reminisced a little about his own last visit there, said again that he approved of Pat. But it was just verbal wallpaper. His mind was elsewhere. Presently he fell silent, staring at the whisky in his glass.

Blade said, 'If you want to open the hangar doors, sir . . . .'

'What? Oh, I dunno. Your first night back. Hardly fair.'

'That's OK.'

'Well, all right. As a matter of fact there is something.'

Blade sipped his whisky. 'I thought there might be.'

Rhys-Smith gave him a cigarette, lit one himself. 'It's Marak, I'm afraid.'

'Marak?'

'He's back in circulation.'

'Abu Marak?'

'Himself. Large as life and twice as cocky. Trusted friend of the Ingleez and a sten gun to prove it.'

'But that's impossible,' Blade said. 'Marak's dead. Burned in that truck with Tom Race. We buried 'em that morning on the . . . . .'

'Hansell told me what you buried, Jack. Two lumps of charred flesh and a few bones.' Rhys-Smith drew hard on his cigarette. 'It could've been anybody. Anybody at all.'

'No. There were Race's dog tags, remember? We found them beside . . . .'

'Oh, one of them was Race, poor bastard. That much we do know.'

'And the other was Marak.'

'That's how it looked. How it was meant to look. But there was no evidence, was there? No positive identification.'

'There were two men in that truck,' Blade said. 'And we found two bodies. Race and Marak.'

'Not two bodies, Jack. More like eight.'

Blade shook his head. 'I'm sorry, sir, but I was there. There were just two.'

'Out on the salt, yes. But you didn't look in the wreckage of the truck.'

'There was no point. We knew there were only two . . .'

'Alec Squires had a look, Jack. When we heard the word was out about Marak he took Apple down there to check the wreckage. They found a lot more bits and pieces. The bones of at least eight men. Perhaps more.'

Blade tightened the fingers of his left hand round his glass. 'Keep squeezing things,' Pat had said. 'Prevents the muscles stiffening up again.' But it was the muscles of his mind that

were stiff now, unwilling to grip the fact that Marak was alive. He said, 'That raiding party behind the rock-fall?'

Rhys-Smith nodded. 'Probably. My guess is the truck ran smack into 'em up there on the shelf at the mouth of the wadi. Must've been quite a party while it lasted. Race'd have the sten, of course. That must've helped a bit.'

'But not enough,' Blade said, his mind flexing now, visualising the narrow shelf above the salt flats, the wind howling down the wadi in a smother of flying sand, the Bedu jinking about in the sudden glare, Race fighting for his life in the darkness after they had shot out the headlights.

'No,' Rhys-Smith said. 'Not enough. In the end they chopped him. Found Marak in the truck and released him.'

'And he assumed command.'

'Right. They ran the truck over the edge, piled their own dead into it and set it alight. But one body they kept. Laid it out on the salt beside Race's corpse. Soused them both with petrol and burned 'em.'

Blade nodded. It had Marak's name written all over it. The authentic, ruthless signature of the man who had butchered bin Hafid and all his tribe.

Watching him, Rhys-Smith said, 'It adds up, Jack.'

'Yes.' Blade remembered that morning on the edge of the salt. The half-filled grave. The lone Bedu running towards them. The single, well-placed shot that had killed him from behind in mid-stride. That would have been Marak too. Not wanting them to know he was alive. Not prepared, at that stage, to show his hand and take on the fire-power of the Brownings and stens ranged above him on the shelf. 'And you say he's calling himself our friend now?'

'That's what we hear.' Rhys-Smith shook his head in wry admiration. 'You've got to hand it to the little bastard. We set out to nail him for murder, bring him in and hang him. And what happens? He slips through our fingers and ends up twice as powerful as before. King of the bloody Hadramaut, recog-

nised and accepted by His Britannic Majesty's armed forces. Our noble ally, for God's sake.'

'And now there's trouble down there?'

'If there isn't there damned soon will be. You know Marak's style.'

'Does Maitland know?'

'Not from me, he doesn't. But it's only a matter of time before he finds out.'

'And has our guts for garters.'

'Oh, undoubtedly. Mine, anyway. So we've got to get organised a bit sharpish. I'm sending Hansell out with Orange tomorrow. A fact-finding mission. If we're going to get clobbered by Maitland and his cloak and dagger boys I want to know exactly what the score is down there before the awkward questions start.' Rhys-Smith hesitated, scowling. Blade knew what was coming. 'I don't suppose you'd care to go with him, Jack?'

'Dave Hansell?'

Rhys-Smith nodded. 'You know Marak. Can identify him positively.'

'And he knows me.'

'Yes.' Rhys-Smith's good eye looked at him apologetically. 'It's just a suggestion, of course. Not an order. You're supposed to take it easy for a bit. Light duties round the Base. Navigation and gunnery courses for the newer crews. All that bull. But if . . . .'

'You don't think seeing me will – well, strain his hospitality?' Blade said, and realised that it was not something he would have said before. Before he met Pat. Did love breed caution, blunt the edge of courage?

'Not enough to matter. Not with the sort of muscle Orange'll be showing.'

Blade nodded, accepting the imagined rebuke.

'You'd go as Hansell's 2i/c. I understand you get on well together.'

'Yes. Yes, we do. OK. I'll go, sir.'

'Good show. The more you can find out the better placed we'll be to spike Maitland's guns.'

And that's what it's all about, Blade thought. Being one jump in front of the pongos.

'Drink up,' Rhys-Smith said. 'Let's go and eat.'

Walking together across the sand towards the Mess they skirted the sandbag wall of the petrol dump where the trucks of Orange were taking on fuel for the next day. In the glare of the lights slung on poles above the dump the square, unpainted petrol tins gleamed like huge silver ingots stacked in a vault. Blade looked with affection at the bulky silhouettes of the three-tonners, welcomed the smell of petrol as a hungry man savours the smell of cooking. Sand, flies and dirt, this was his world. The place in which he had found his manhood. He said, 'About Tom Race, sir.'

'Yes?'

'I take it someone's written to his people?'

Rhys-Smith shook his head. 'His parents are dead. And his wife . . .'

'Yes, I heard about his wife. Perhaps I should write to her?'

'It's been taken care of, Jack. I wrote myself, as a matter of fact.'

'Did she reply?'

'No.'

'I see.'

They passed the Sergeants' Mess and walked down beside the ammunition dump where the wooden boxes of .303, sten and Browning bullets were stacked on baulks of timber laid on the sand. The Gurkha guard smacked his rifle in the Present. Rhys-Smith touched his cap to him. 'He wasn't worried, y'know, Jack. About his wife, I mean.'

'No?'

'Not a scrap. Whatever sort of marriage they'd had, it was over long before he was posted in to us here.'

'He told you that?'

'He told Alec Squires. When the letter from her solicitor

came he showed it to Alec. He was, apparently, quite calm about it. If anything, relieved. Glad to be shot of her.' Rhys-Smith shook his head, his face set and hard under the peaked cap. 'Even so, I wouldn't have let him go on CATCHER if I'd known. He made Alec promise not to tell me. Said he needed the trip to get her finally out of his system.'

'Makes sense, I suppose,' Blade said. But something had been eating Race. If not his marriage, what? 'He was OK, y'know, sir,' he said, remembering the fight in the wadi, Race in the pit under the fifteen-hundredweight, the camels coming down through the defile. 'A bit on edge, perhaps. But basically OK.'

'Until he cracked,' Rhys-Smith said bleakly.

'Not his fault.'

'Hell, no. Not his, not yours. Nobody's fault, Jack. Just this bloody awful desert.'

'Yes,' Blade said. The oven heat of the afternoons. The long, empty miles. The feeling of being watched. Some could take it, even in a strange sort of way enjoy it. Some couldn't. It was as simple as that.

Or so he told himself.

10

The entrance to the Wadi Dugri was narrow, like a canyon. Orange drove in between the high rock walls, Hansell's fifteen-hundredweight leading. He was driving, Blade in the seat beside him. The second fifteen-hundredweight was tucked in behind, ready to move out on their right flank when the wadi broadened. The three-tonners completed the column, growling along in a haze of flying dust, the beat of their engines loud in the confined space.

Looking up Blade saw the glint of sunlight on rifle barrels where Marak's scouts watched from the high rocks. The covers were off the Brownings and a man stood behind each pair crouched over the pistol grips. Under the canvas tilts of the three-tonners the men of Orange squatted on their bedrolls, their sten guns in their hands.

It was mid-afternoon, very hot, the air still and lifeless. As they emerged or to the broad wadi floor Hansell said, 'He's let us in, Jack.'

Blade grinned tightly, the nerves twitching in his stomach and along his spine. Whether he would let them out again was another matter.

Hansell braked and stopped. The second fifteen-hundredweight swung away and halted some fifty yards to their right. Behind them the three-tonners circled into a nose-to-tail laager, the men tumbling out over the tailboards, climbing up on top of the tilts to lie prone or diving under the trucks on their bellies making a ring of pointing gun barrels. It was a

precise, unhurried, disciplined operation which, in a little under ninety seconds, transformed the rolling columnn into a static fort.

The oasis spread over the wadi floor which was perhaps a mile wide at that point. The ground sloped away slightly in front of the truck and they could look right across the wells and palms and the little patches of cultivated barley and the shabby black tents pitched haphazardly among the trees. There were women working in the barley, milking goats, washing clothes at one of the wells. Some had babies on their hips. Clouds of flies hovered over them. The familiar, rancid stench drifted up towards the trucks.

The Bedu began to come out of the tents and walk up the slope, casual, easy, trailing their rifles, not looking for trouble. Blade stared hard at the man leading them.

'Marak?' Hansell said.

Blade shrugged. 'Hard to tell at this range.'

'So let's go and find out.'

They got out of the truck, unbuckled their webbing belts and holsters and left them on the bonnet, the butts of the revolvers black against the sand-yellow camouflage paint. Covered by the long-barrelled Brownings they walked down the slope to meet the sheik.

At first Blade was not sure. Not absolutely, one hundred percent sure. The skin of the man coming towards them was tanned a deep brown and he had grown a beard and moustache, black and curly as his hair. These together with the white cowl of his burnous changed the shape of his face. He stopped walking and waited for them; the old Bedu trick of making strangers come to him. His stance was the typical Bedu stance, feet slightly apart, black-booted beneath his heavy striped robe, hands clasped over the hilt of the curved knife tucked into the bandolier round his waist. And he spoke as the Bedu spoke, the formal, courteous phrases of welcome rolling easily off his tongue as he greeted Hansell. He concentrated on Hansell, seeming to know instinctively that he

was in command, giving Blade no more than a cursory glance. But that was enough. Blade saw the arrogance in those dark eyes, heard the distinctive gipsy whine in the voice sharp-edged under the Arabic gutturals. Saw and heard and knew who he was. Not Abu Marak. Race. Incredibly, unmistakably Tom Race.

'So thou art Abu Marak, sheik of this oasis?' Hansell said levelly.

Race looked at him coolly. 'Aywah. Have I not said so?' A small, mocking smile curved his lips, stopping just short of insolence.

Blade searched the faces of the men behind him. They returned his gaze, unconcerned, relaxed, even a little bored. If they were intimidated by the strength of the patrol they gave no sign of it. He tried to pick out Yusef who had sat beside Marak in the tent that night in July. But he could not see him. Killed, perhaps, that morning on the edge of the salt when the fifteen-hundredweight had bogged down? Yusef and most of the original Maaruf Saar collected by Marak. And the survivors? Were they here now, seeding the peaceful oasis with violence? Had Race somehow persuaded them to accept him? Or had he killed them off?

Hansell said, 'Then thou wilt recognise this Effendi who stands at my side?'

'Aywah.' The bearded face turned towards Blade at last. There was no arrogance in the eyes now. Only uncertainty. A plea. 'He is called Blade, the servant of Ismeet. Is it not so?' It was beautifully done. The stance, the voice, the casual confidence. Only the plea in his eyes marred the effect.

'It is the truth,' Blade said and stopped, letting him sweat a little. Race's eyes held his for a moment, flickered and looked away.

'We have much to talk about, ya Sidi,' Hansell said then.

Race nodded. 'Aywah. But first we eat together. As friends.'

Hansell's smile was cold. 'Let us eat indeed,' he said, his

voice as frosty as his smile. 'As to friendship, it is of that which we must speak.'

He doesn't recognise him, Blade thought. He thinks it really is Marak.

They set up the guard roster, saw the men of Orange fed and went down to eat in the oasis under the pale stars of the early evening, the palm trees like paper cut-outs black against the afterglow of the sunset. There were four cooking fires burning in shallow pits dug into the sand with a sheep spitted and roasting over each. The smell of the cooking meat was mouth-watering; a rich, Old Testament smell unchanged since Abraham.

They sat in a big hollow square, Race sharing his sheik's carpet with the two officers. The food was good. Very good. Thick slices of roast mutton, fatty and succulent, served on huge wooden platters with barley and palm shoots fried in goats' butter. Afterwards there were bunches of dates and a dish of figs. And for Race and his two guests, black bitter coffee in small metal cups.

One of the Bedu began to play a shepherd's flute. The thin quarter tones floated over their heads, now sad, now joyful; a lament for the sheep coupled with the pleasure of good eating. In the tents around them they could hear the women singing, their voices charged with a high, eerie quality as endemic to the desert as the sigh of the wind in the palms. There was beauty in the singing but also cruelty, as there was in the women themselves. Cruelty was a part of life in the desert. But only the Bedu women seemed to enjoy it for its own sake, plucking their victims apart as small children tear the legs and wings off flies. Listening to those keening voices Blade felt a prickle of unease. To be given to the women was the worst of deaths.

Presently Race said, 'Wilt thou walk with me a little, Blade?'

'Just the two of us?'

'Aywah. There are things to be said between us.'

'Of friendship?'

'Inshallah.'

Blade nodded. 'We will walk.' He saw Hansell's eyebrows rise in warning and said in English, 'It's OK, Dave. I know what I'm doing.'

Race smiled, pulled the knife out of his bandolier and laid it on the carpet in front of Hansell, the hilt towards him. 'Do not fret thyself, Ingleez. We walk as brothers, Blade and I.' He turned to Blade. 'Bring two of thy men to walk behind us if thou . . . .'

'La,' Blade said. 'No. It is not necessary.'

They skirted the edge of the trees and stepped out on to the broad, bare floor of the wadi, walking easily, Race limping slightly. The stars brightened above them as they left the glow of the cooking fires. The great black arch of the sky was like the dome of a mosque over their heads, the whisper of sand under their feet as soft as a murmured prayer. It was a time for confessions.

After they had gone a little way Race said in English, 'Thanks, Skip.'

'Don't speak too soon. It could still be masks off at midnight.'

'Yes? Would it interest you to know the Brownings are sited to cover the entrance to the wadi? You drove under them when you came in this afternoon. They could make your leaving – difficult.'

'What Brownings?' Blade said.

'CATCHER's. I off-loaded them and everything else I could use before I burned the truck.'

Blade said quietly. 'I don't like threats, Race.'

'Nor I. Let's call it a warning, shall we?'

They walked on in silence for a moment or two, then Blade said, 'I take it Marak's dead?'

'Yes.' Race's voice was flat, as if speaking of a dog put down.

'I see.'

'He was a dead man from the moment we snatched him on CATCHER. Which is better, to be tried in Riyadh and publicly hanged or beheaded? Or to be shot cleanly in the back of the head?'

'You killed him, then?'

'I had to kill him. That was what I joined CATCHER to do.' The inspection lamp swinging in the back of the three-tonner. The pistol barrel pressed firmly into the nape of the neck. The shriek of the wind muffling the shot.

When he had left Blade and the others sleeping in their bedrolls the wind had been no more than a fresh breeze breaking the crests of the high dunes. But in less than half an hour Race knew he was in trouble.

Now the wind was a brawling giant, shaking the truck, toying with it. An enemy he had not reckoned with. In the beam of the headlights he could see the sand on the wadi floor lifting like a loose carpet, curling up steeply to slap against the windscreen. He locked both hands on the wheel, his left leg braced against the steel bulkhead under the dashboard, his right foot sensitive on the throttle pedal. He was driving too fast. He knew that. The truck was lurching and bouncing, the oversize tyres barely holding their grip. The roar of the engine hammered in his head like an angry, mocking voice: 'Too late. Too late.'

All his experience told him he should stop. Snug down in the back of the truck with Marak and wait for the storm to blow itself out. It was the sensible, the only thing to do. But he drove on. He dared not take the risk of the wadi silting up, blocking his escape route to the salt. The truck juddered over a scree of sharp-edged stones exposed by the scouring wind and he sucked in his breath, feeling a sudden stab of pain lance through his left thigh. He shifted his position slightly, favouring the bandaged leg. If the wound opened again, began to bleed .....

It seemed a long time since the ambush in the wadi that

morning on the edge of the salt. He had made a mess of that. A hell of a mess. Bungled it like an amateur. It was there that Marak should have died along with his men. That way, he would not be driving through this storm now with Orange on his tail. This damned, freak storm, out of season, unexpected. If it were not for that he would be all right.

He came to the place where the wadi divided and forked right. The wind swung in behind him and he felt the motion of the truck ease a little. Maybe he was going to make it.

But his relief was short-lived. The wind bellied the laced-down back flaps of the tilt like a sail, thrusting the truck down the narrow wadi, making it shiver like a model in a wind tunnel. He throttled back against the mounting speed but with every yard the slope of the wadi was increasing, the pressure of the wind lifting the three-tonner's tail so that it began to float. He felt himself losing control, shifted his foot to the brake pedal and pressed down firmly. The truck immediately went into a long slide. He released the brake and wrestled with the wheel, turning into the skid. The side of the dune rushed towards him, towering in the headlights. He whipped the gear shift down into third, felt the tyres spin and bite, wrenched the truck back into the centre of the wadi, blinking the sweat out of his eyes. He knew he was near the salt now, sensed it waiting for him down there at the mouth of the wadi. Another two miles. Three at the most. Then he would have it made. Once he hit the salt he would be sheltered by the escarpment from the full force of the wind. He could drive a diagonal, south-west course, cut across the corner of the salt and be off it and into the Jebel Tuwaik before the sun rose. He crouched over the wheel, shoulders hunched, arms braced to hold the truck steady, his face a grotesque mask of sand and sweat. 'Come on, you old bitch,' he said. 'Keep your head up and your arse down and you can bloody do it.'

The wadi was a cataract of sand now, the big three-tonner weightless as a cockle-shell shooting the rapids. The wheel

kicked and twisted under his hands, the glare of the headlights reflected back at him off the ragged curtains of sand spray swirling down off the dunes. Visibility was very bad. Never more than twenty yards, often down to five. The howl of the wind rose to a shriek, a banshee descant soaring above the snarl of the engine. The cab was slowly filling with sand. It lay banked on the steel floor and in a deep drift on the passenger seat. He could feel it sifting down under his overalls, taste it in his mouth. He wondered how long it would be before the air-filter on the carburettor clogged solid and the engine choked on too rich a mixture, spluttering and misfiring as the plugs sooted up. How long before he smashed an axle or twisted a track rod on a reef of rock hidden under the driving sand.

He saw the curving dune wall leap out of the darkness at him as the wadi turned sharply, locked the wheel hard over and took the truck through the bend in a four-wheel drift. There was a bone-jarring jolt as the nearside slammed into the sand wall. Then the truck bounced off and he was clear. A sudden vicious cross-wind swept away the curtain of sand for a moment and there at last was the salt ahead of him. He grinned, baring his teeth. And the grin froze. For the salt was also below him. A long way below. And between him and that smooth, hard surface on which he had pinned all his hopes a black, terrifying drop.

He stamped hard on the brake, hauling the wheel round as the edge of the cliff slid in towards him. The nose of the truck swung left. The wind smashed into the side of the tilt. He felt the big three-tonner heel dangerously, threatening to roll over. The four wheels were locked now, the tyres shedding rubber on the flinty surface of the shelf. The truck heeled further over, teetered a long, agonising moment and then dropped back squarely, bottoming hard on its suspension. And stopped. He cut the engine, yanked up the handbrake lever and slumped forward over the wheel, drenched in sweat, the muscles in his thighs jumping with reaction.

The bullet came silently out of the roaring darkness, shattered the nearside panel of the windscreen and buried itself in the sand on the passenger seat. Race had the door open and the lights out in an instinctive, split-second response, grabbed his sten and rolled out on to the sand and under the truck. Another bullet ploughed into the radiator and the wind sprayed hot water over his head and shoulders. He squirmed backwards clear of the truck, crouched by the tailboard in the darkness and reached up to unlace the back flaps. The wind plucked at his overalls and he had to hang on to the tailboard chain with his left hand while his right groped about inside the flap and closed on the cord switch of the inspection lamp. He took three or four deep breaths to steady his nerves. His brain was cool now and quick, planning his next few moves. The sten dangled by its sling from his left elbow. He let go of the chain, slid the sten down into his hand, jerked the cord, saw the light come on in the truck, ducked and ran in a crouch for the mouth of the wadi.

It was like running into the backwash of a spinning propellor. The force of the wind took his breath, filled his overalls, threatened to lift him bodily and whirl him away. The sand flying into his face was sharp, pricking his skin like needles. He ran perhaps fifty yards, tripped blindly over a ridge of rock and went down, rolling and twisting as he fell. Suddenly he was in a little sheltered pocket, protected from the wind by the dunes at the back of the shelf. The mouth of the wadi was on his right. The truck in front of him. He lay on his side with the sten cradled in his arms. Through the dark fog of sand he could see the light in the truck flashing and fading as the loosened canvas flaps thrashed in the wind. He dug into the thigh pocket of his overalls, ignoring the stab of his wound, took out a full magazine and snapped it into the sten. He rubbed the sand out of his eyes, lay flat on his stomach and settled his elbows firmly.

In the hollow at the foot of the dunes the air was uncannily still. It was like lying in a cave with the storm raging just

outside. Now he could hear the rifle shots coming from his left. He turned his head, peering into the darkness, but could see nothing. He would have to wait until they decided it was safe to approach the truck. Silhouetted against the light they would give him some sort of target.

Listening and waiting, he reckoned there were probably not more than six of them. The firing was ragged, coming in little spurts with long silences between. He guessed two or more were inching their way forward across the shelf, the others covering them. He wondered what Marak was thinking, trussed-up there in the back of the truck with the light shining in his eyes.

Suddenly they were there. Three, no four of them. Standing by the tailboard. He saw them as vague, shadowy shapes in the intermittent gleam from the inspection lamp. His finger curled round the trigger of the sten, waiting. They had the back flap open now, the light streaming out. They were staring in at Marak in his rope and blanket cocoon. Race could see their ankle-length robes flapping in the wind. He sighted the sten and squeezed the trigger. The Bedu by the truck went down in a heap as the bullets scythed into them. Race sat up, curled his good leg under him and pushed himself back against the dune wall. He swung the gun to his left and fired another long burst parallel with the dune. He dropped flat again as the magazine emptied, fumbled a fresh one out of his pocket and slammed it home. Then he was up and running, the dune wall close to his left shoulder, the sten bucking in his hands.

He almost fell over the three bodies, stopped short, swung the gun back towards the truck and stood breathing hard. There were no answering shots. He waited a couple of minutes, the wound in his leg throbbing, his hands white-knuckled on the sten. Nobody moved. No shots. Just the howl of the wind streaming out of the wadi, the black bulk of the truck with the light still burning inside the tilt.

He heard the chink of harness and moved cautiously to his

left along the foot of the dune wall. The camels were kneeling, hobbled for the night beside the single, ragged tent. He fired a short burst into the tent and waited again.

Satisfied, he ducked and ran out into the wind, heading for the front of the truck. He threw himself down and squirmed in under the cab, working his way towards the tailboard. In the little patch of light from the back of the truck he could see the four bodies lying on the ground. He put a three second burst into them, waited a full minute and then crawled out beside them. The wind slammed into him and he gripped the tailboard, slung the sten over his right shoulder and pulled himself up into the truck.

Marak was lying on his back, his eyes hard and bitter in the yellow pool of light. Race looked down at him dispassionately, no pity in his face, no hatred either. Meeting his eyes, Marak knew his life was over.

The canvas tilt boomed and cracked. The truck rocked uneasily, battered by the fury of the wind. It was an apocalyptic setting, as if all the forces by which Marak had murdered his way into power cruelty, pride, ruthlessness – had somehow materialised in the ill-lit cave of the three-tonner, riding in on the wind from the sand wastes, the endless marching dunes, to bear witness against him.

Race drew his revolver, thumbed off the safety catch and went down on one knee. Marak's lips moved but the words were lost in the mindless clamour of the wind. Race rolled the Bedu over on to his stomach, pulled off his burnous, parted the lank, greasy hair with the barrel of the revolver, pressed its mouth firmly into the nape of his neck and shot him.

He unbuckled his webbing belt and stripped quickly – overalls, shirt, vest, pants – everything. He knelt naked by the corpse, untied the ropes, pulled away the blanket and turned the body over on to its back. The face was barely recognisable, torn apart by the bullet which had burst its way out through the right cheek taking an eye with it. Race wrapped his shirt round Marak's head and carefully stripped

the body. He dressed himself in the Bedu's clothes, took off his identity discs and looped them round Marak's neck. The Bedu looked small now he was naked, his body thin and dirty, the rib-cage clearly visible under the dark skin. Race put on the soft leather boots and laced them up. He fastened the bandolier round his waist and thrust the revolver into it, tied the burnous firmly on his head, switched off the lamp and dropped out over the tailboard. He went round to the lee side of the truck and stood for a minute watching and listening. He saw nothing but the sand streaming over the edge of the cliff, heard nothing but the manic shouts of the wind.

Satisfied, he climbed into the cab, started the engine and switched on the headlights. He drove slowly across the width of the shelf to where the camels were hobbled in the shelter of the dune. The animals stirred uneasily, turning their heads away from the glare of the lights. He switched off the engine, went round behind and dropped the tailboard. He began to off-load the truck. The Brownings, ammunition, grenades, ration cartons, water. He took the rifles and his own sten gun and a bundle of blankets. But he left the square tins of petrol and the other stens and the canvas bags of spares. And Marak's naked corpse.

Working steadily, methodically, he loaded everything on to the camels, distributing the weight evenly. The Bedu clothes he was wearing worried him not at all. He had spent a lot of time in the Training Camp outside Alex wearing similar robes and had grown accustomed to them. He linked the camels on a long leading rein, loosed their hobble ropes and took them along the shelf by the light of the headlights until he found a place where the slope down to the salt was less precipitous. Still far too steep for a truck but passable to camels. He led them down carefully, encouraging them gently with words he had learned in the Training Camp. At the foot of the slope he got them down on their knees out of the wind and hobbled them.

He struggled back up through the loose, sliding sand, struck

the tent and bundled it into the back of the truck, manhandling the three dead Bedu in after it. He started the engine for the last time. The radiator was virtually empty now and the needle on the temperature gauge flicked over into the red. He reversed slowly, backing the truck round until it faced the edge of the cliff. Then he drove forward to stop by the bodies of the other Bedu, whom he had cut down with the sten. He switched off the engine, got down and ran round to the back of the truck. From one of the bodies he took a large, curved knife and pushed it into the bandolier beside his revolver. Then he lifted three of the bodies in turn, heaving them into the truck, dragged out Marak's body and dropped it on the sand beside the fourth man. He climbed into the truck and used the knife to puncture three tins of petrol. He splashed the fluid over the bodies and round the inside of the tilt. He grabbed another tin, got out of the truck and sluiced petrol over the bodies of Marak and the other man. He threw the empty tin into the truck, raised and pegged the tailboard and laced down the back flaps. He was beginning to weave a little now, tiredness loading his legs and shoulders. Under the robe his body streamed with sweat. The throbbing of the wound in his thigh matched the laboured thud of his heart.

He tied the flap of his burnous more firmly over his mouth and nose and rested for a moment, leaning against the tailboard, ankle-deep in a river of flowing, wind-driven sand. Then he went round the side of the truck and opened the cab door. Standing on the step he reached in and started the engine. It ran with a lumpy, grating noise. The heat from it brought the sweat out on his face. He released the handbrake, straightened and felt for the clutch pedal with his left foot. He rammed the gear shift into first and let the clutch up slowly. The truck began to move and he jumped clear. Urged on by the wind the three-tonner rolled forward and toppled over the edge of the cliff in a long, slow somersault. It hit the salt tail first and exploded in a sheet of brilliant white-blue

flame, the shattered inspection lamp igniting the petrol fumes under the tilt.

Race watched it for a moment, breathing hard, legs spread, hands on his knees, back bowed to the wind. Then he dragged the two petrol-soaked bodies a few yards to his right and pitched them over the cliff, making sure they fell clear of the burning truck.

He ran along the edge of the cliff, ploughed his way down the slope beside the camels and turned back towards the truck. He skirted round it and found the two bodies lying crumpled on the salt. He grabbed them by the feet and dragged them nearer the fire. The heat on his back was fierce. He turned his head, shielding his face with his arm, and saw the flames shooting up in a roaring, flaring column that spread in a ragged fan as it met the wind pouring over the lip of the shelf above him. In the skeleton of the truck he could see the bodies shrivelling in an inferno of blazing petrol. He bent, gripped Marak's body by the ankles, swung it round and let go. It hit the salt, rolled over and lay spreadeagled on its back close to the truck. He did the same with the other one. He pulled the revolver out of his bandolier. The heat dried the sweat on his face. He could feel the skin tightening round his eyes. He raised the revolver carefully and fired a shot into the petrol tank slung under the main chassis member. The heat from the flames had built up pressure in the tank and the petrol jetted out in a fine spray and immediately caught fire, spreading across the salt in a blazing pool. The pool reached the two bodies, lapped round them and engulfed them. Their arms and legs twitched grotesquely as the muscles shrank. Marak half sat up, the shirt round his head a burnous of fire, and then fell back. The flames seem to grow out of his chest and stomach, the skin charring and splitting. There was a sickly-sweet smell of roasting flesh.

Race turned away, pulled the flap of his burnous away from his face, bent forward and vomited, the bile gushing bitter in his throat and over his tongue. He wiped his mouth

with the back of his hand, straightened and slowly walked back to the camels, light-headed with horror, limping as the pain from his wound stitched along his thigh.

Spooked by the fire, the camels were grunting in terror, straining at their hobbles. He spoke to them quietly, moving among them, patting their necks, stroking their ears. His voice was soothing, his hands reassuring. The camels nuzzled him, blowing rank breath in his face, sensing the gipsy empathy that flowed out of his voice and touch in marked contrast to the ruthlessness that had brought him through the fight on the shelf, the coldly calculated setting-up of the scene beside the burning truck. 'Easy, my beauties, my little ones,' he said, loosening the hobble ropes. 'Now we will go.'

He got them up and led them along the foot of the cliff towards the tumble of rocks now plainly visible in the leaping light of the flames. He rounded the end of the rock fall, got the camels down again and hobbled them. Then he sat down with his back against a rock, wrapped his robe around him and closed his eyes. His head was swimming with nausea and fatigue, the after-taste of vomit lingering in his mouth like the sediment of passion after the killings, the nightmare of that long, back-breaking struggle with the truck and the corpses in the fury of the wind.

Presently he felt a little better. He opened his eyes, stood up and unstrapped his sten from one of the kneeling camels. He fitted a fresh clip into it, slung it over his shoulder and went down the salt to the end of the rock fall. The truck was still burning, but less fiercely now. He supposed he ought to go back to it and check everything. But the memory of the wind howling out of the mouth of the wadi changed his mind. He turned wearily and went back to sit with the camels and wait for the morning.

II

'Which was when the bin Rashid came?' Blade said. Above him the stars glowed and sparkled in the black sky, huge silver coins on the yashmak of the night. The sound of singing drifted down the wadi, high-pitched, eerily beautiful, remote as the music of the circling planets. As always, the darkness was kind to the desert, veiling its cruel face. Only the pitiless fingers of the sun laid it bare.

'At first light, travelling with the sun,' Race said, seeing again the tall, curiously medieval silhouettes riding over the salt towards him, the long tassels of their saddle-cloths swinging, the early sunlight glinting on the bullets on their bandoliers. He remembered the soft thud of the camels' pads, the hoarse rasp of their breathing. And the tightness in his chest, the sudden surge of adrenalin that had washed away his tiredness and left his mind cool and alert.

He had stood by his kneeling camels, the sten gun held casually at arms-length across his thighs, and watched them come. Twelve men, lean-faced below the distinctive striped burnouses of the bin Rashid. Dwellers in the Empty Quarter, hard-eyed, armed, ready for trouble. And the Arabic phrases of salutation, formed themselves on his tongue as the long hours he had spent in the stuffy cubicles of the language laboratory at the Training Camp began at last to pay off. 'Salaam. Ana Abu Marak, sheik of the Maaruf Saar,' he had said, his eyes meeting the eyes of the bin Rashid boldly, with arrogance, with warning. The desert Bedu were rich only in

pride, their careful etiquette the protocol of violence. 'I am he whom el askaria Ingleezi captured but could not hold.'

'And they accepted you?' Blade said.

Race shrugged. 'I'm here, aren't I?'

Blade nodded, knowing it could not have been easy. One man with five camels loaded with loot. And the bin Rashid poor and filled with greed. 'You had trouble with at least one of them,' he said.

'The death-or-glory boy?' Race shook his head. 'He damned near blew the whole thing, didn't he? Charging out like that and Hooper there waiting with his .303.'

'It was you who shot him, of course?'

'Had to. We hadn't a hope in hell of taking you on. In any case, I'd had a bellyful of killing.'

'Yes.' Blade took out his cigarettes. 'You still using these?'

Race shook his head. Blade lit a cigarette, smoked for a moment or two and then said, 'Why, Tom?'

'Orders.'

'To kill Marak and take his place?'

'Yes.'

'Bull.'

Race shrugged. 'Suit yourself,' he said, unperturbed. 'You asked. I've told you.'

'Orders from whom?' Blade said.

'No. I'm sorry. I can't tell you that.'

'I see,' Blade said bitterly. 'You damn near get us all chopped that morning when you dug the fifteen-hundredweight in. And the same night you run out and leave us, clobber Marak and half-a-dozen others, burn the truck and disappear into the blue with a bunch of bin Rashid. And now you calmly tell me you were acting on orders and I'm not to ask questions.'

Race said, 'It's a question of trust, isn't it?'

'Backed by a pair of Brownings and a camp full of cut-throats? That's trust?'

Race chuckled. 'Fair comment.'

'Well?'

'Look, the guns are just window dressing, right? A status symbol. I've only got four belts of ammo for 'em.' There was something in his voice which Blade had not heard before. An assurance, a kind of casual ease born of authority. 'If you think . . . .'

'I'll tell you what I think, Sergeant,' Blade cut in. 'I think you've jacked the RAF in and gone over the wall. In my book you're just a deserter.'

'And you've come to take me back and face the music?'

'Yes.'

'Just like that?' Race's voice was amused.

'That's up to you. If you choose to be stroppy about it . . . .'

'My dear chap,' Race said. 'My scouts told me two days ago Orange was on its way. If I'd really been on the run d'you think I'd have waited for you here?'

'Perhaps not. But you didn't know I was with Hansell, did you?'

Race shook his head. 'I knew they'd send somebody. Squires or Hansell. I'd budgeted for that. But I didn't reckon on you turning up. Not so soon.'

'Well, I'm here.'

'Yes.'

Blade waited for him to go on. When he didn't, he said, 'Well?'

'Jack, I'm sorry. I have my orders and . . . .'

'Not good enough,' Blade said sharply. 'And I'm not Jack. Not to you.'

Race shrugged. 'Sorry.'

'Sir.'

'If you like. We use Christian names off parade. Between brother officers, that is.'

'Oh, I see,' Blade said sarcastically. 'So now you're commissioned?'

'Captain, actually. Acting, of course.'

'Of course.'

Race sighed. 'You don't believe me?'

'No,' Blade said, but he was no longer sure. Not absolutely sure. Was this, perhaps, the explanation? The key to the authority they had mistaken for arrogance, the self-contained, secretive isolation they had put down to bloody-mindedness?

'Pity,' Race said calmly, as if it didn't matter.

Half-convinced, Blade said, 'Military Intelligence, no doubt?'

Race said nothing.

'And the Beaux at Gambut - before you joined the DPG?'

Race said, 'Genuine enough. It was just that my posting from there to Zubair took rather a long time. I had things to do in between.'

Blade nodded. This way the pieces fitted together. Not that that proved anything. But . . . He said, 'What about your wife?'

'I'm single, thank God.'

'But that letter from the . . . . ?'

'Solicitor? You heard about that?' Race shrugged. 'These things can be arranged.'

'By Maitland, I suppose?' Blade said, not expecting an answer.

The question triggered the memories in Race's mind.

'In the RAF? On leave?' Major Charles Maitland said incredulously.

'Yes,' Race said. And added politely, 'Sir.'

Maitland looked at his dark blue, tropical-weight suit, cream silk shirt, Ghezira Sporting Club tie. 'I don't believe it,' he said. 'Got your pay book?'

'Not with me, no.'

'Dog tags?'

Race shook his head. Pay book and dog tags did not fit the civilian image he liked to assume on leave. 'I could get them, of course.'

'I'm sure you could,' Maitland said drily. Cairo was

infested with German agents, the trade in British pay books brisk. He drew a message pad towards him and took out a pencil. 'Name, rank and number?'

'1473362 Corporal Race T.D.'

Maitland wrote it down. 'Trade?'

'Armourer. Attached 160 Squadron.'

'160? They're Liberators, aren't they? Up Bardia way?'

'Beaufighters, sir. At Gambut. Or they were when I left five days ago.'

Maitland put the pencil down. 'You've been walking round Cairo dressed like that for the better part of a week?'

'Yes.' Race seemed mildly surprised.

'On leave?' Maitland's voice hardened. 'Or AWOL?'

'On leave.'

'Staying where?'

Race hesitated. 'I've got a room in the bazaar.'

Maitland raised his eyebrows. 'That whole area's out-of-bounds to British personnel.'

'Yes, I know.' And again the hesitation. 'I – I like to be on my own.'

'Do you indeed?' Maitland sat back and looked up at Race. They were in a small, cell-like room behind the Provost Marshal's office at GHQ ME. It was a few minutes before midnight and the room was hot and airless, stale with the smell of sweat and cigarette smoke. Whitewashed walls, polished composition floor, barred window. A room for asking questions in. 'Now you listen to me. I find you eating in an expensive restaurant out-of-bounds to Other Ranks. You're wearing civilian clothes and you have no means of identification. You've got money in your pocket and you speak fluent Arabic. And you expect me to believe you're a corporal armourer on leave?'

'No,' Race said. He seemed quite unconcerned, standing in front of the table in his well-cut suit, poised, relaxed, with a kind of composure that was close to arrogance.

'What?'

'I don't expect you to believe it,' Race said. 'But it happens to be the truth.' Useless to try to explain to this Staff Major with his private hotel room and the freedom of the city that the crowded tents of the Leave Centre at Abbassia were no relief from the crowded tents on the Forward Air Strip at Gambut; that what he needed was to shed his RAF uniform and his numbered RAF identity and become again for a few days a person in his own right, solitary, self-contained, his own man.

Maitland said in German, 'I should warn you that not everyone in this building is as reasonable as I am. Nor as patient.'

'I'm sorry?' Race said.

'You don't speak German?'

'No.'

'No?' Maitland's deceptively mild eyes checked Race's glossy black hair, the dark, bold eyes, the tanned face. Was there a hint of the Mediterranean there? He thought of the POW cages outside Alexandria. 'Italian, then?'

Race smiled. 'No.'

'You find this amusing?' Maitland said, his voice sharp.

'I'm sorry.' Race waited a moment and then said, 'You can check with the squadron, sir.'

'Oh, we will. For what it's worth. Obviously you've done your homework – or had it done for you. I'm sure there is a Corporal Race with 160. Whether or not you are he is quite another matter.'

'The Adjutant will vouch for me. Flight Lieutenant Harper. He signed my leave pass.'

Maitland nodded. 'I hope you're right.' He stood up, walked round the table towards the door, turned suddenly and said, 'The address of this room in the bazaar?'

Race told him.

Maitland opened the door. Two Redcaps were standing in the corridor; big men, all blanco and brass and boot polish, with cropped heads and faces that looked as though they had

been sandpapered. He said to Race, 'The other side of the coin.' And to the Redcaps, 'Take him down.'

As the Redcaps stepped forward, Race said quickly, 'Sir.'

'Yes?' Maitland's eyes were disappointed, a little contemptuous.

'If I could be put – by myself?'

'Solitary?'

'Yes.'

Maitland's expression changed subtly. He looked at Race, aware of a sudden intuitive excitement, a pricking of the thumbs. If this man's story checked out he might – just might – be the one they could use. He said, 'I think that can be arranged.'

The two Redcaps marched Race down to the cell, took his tie, belt and shoe laces, put a bucket in the corner at the foot of the plank bed, slammed the door and locked it and left him. Race took off his jacket, folded it to make a pillow, kicked off his shoes, lay down and pulled the single blanket over him. He was asleep within minutes.

They wakened him at six the next morning, doubled him naked out of the cell and down the corridor to the shower, gave him a razor but no shaving soap and stood over him while he scraped the beard off his face. When he got back to the cell his uniform was lying on the bed. Which meant that they had located and searched the room in the bazaar. He dressed, breakfasted on thin porridge, fried bread and tea, lay down with his hands behind his head and waited.

Just after nine they took him upstairs to the room where Maitland had questioned him. Maitland was not there. A captain of the Military Police was sitting behind the trestle table with his hat on. An MP sergeant stood rigidly at attention on his left with the charge sheet in his hand. Race's pay book and dog tags were lying on the table in front of the captain.

'1473362 Corporal Race, sir,' the sergeant said, pumping the words out in a harsh, parade-ground shout.

'Read the charges,' the captain said. He had a red face, a small brown moustache and hard, bright eyes. He stared fiercely at Race while the charges were read out. Out-of-bounds. Civilian clothes. Failure to produce pay book. It was all itemised and docketed; a litany of unforgivable sins.

'Anything to say?' the captain said.

'No, sir.'

'You're a bloody fool, Race. D'you know that?'

Race said nothing, staring at the whitewashed wall behind the captain's head.

'Answer the officer when he speaks to you,' the sergeant shouted.

'Sir,' Race said.

The captain heard the contempt in his voice. He bristled. 'Bloody Airforce. Useless bloody shower. Where's your leave pass?'

'In my pay book, sir.'

The captain picked up the pay book, opened it, shook it. 'Nothing here.' He tilted his head back, glaring up at Race under the peak of his hat. 'You're AWOL, aren't you? Aren't you?'

Bastards, Race thought. You've chucked the damned thing away.

'Speak up, man,' the sergeant shouted.

Race looked at him briefly and looked away.

The captain grinned unpleasantly. 'A hard man, sar'nt.'

'Sir.'

'Only one place for hard men, eh?' The captain's eyes held Race's.

'Sir,' the sergeant said.

The captain nodded. 'Twenty-one days detention. You'll go to Almaza on the truck this morning.' He signed the charge sheet. 'Take him out.'

They doubled Race back to the cell and locked him in. Half an hour later they threw in a blackened, greasy dixie, a handful of rags and a small block of pumice. 'Clean it.'

All that day he waited. All the next. They brought him food, more dirty dixies. Took him down the corridor to shower and empty the bucket. Locked him in again. They shouted orders at him but they didn't speak to him. He was puzzled and his fingers were raw from the pumice. But he was not particularly perturbed. Being alone in the cell was no problem, the empty hours no hardship. He was used to being alone.

The third morning they took him back up to the room.

'Well, laddie,' Maitland said. 'So you really are Corporal Race.'

'Thank you, sir.' It was said calmly, almost casually, as if they were discussing a third person.

Maitland looked at the Redcap standing just inside the door. 'All right, Wilson. Wait outside.'

'Sir.' The Redcap saluted and stamped out. Maitland winced, smiled at Race and took off his hat. 'I want to talk to you, Tom.' He raised an eyebrow. 'It is Tom, isn't it?'

'Yes.' But his mother had never shortened the name. To her he had always been Thomas. Thomas the twin, born minutes after his brother Peter of whom he had been an exact replica. Had been, not was. Because Peter had died two days before their tenth birthday, victim of the virus that had killed their mother a week later.

'Sit down, Tom.'

'Thank you, sir.' Race sat down and waited. He had, Maitland noticed approvingly, this capacity to wait; to be unflustered by silences.

'We've been making some enquiries about you,' Maitland said. He was somehow different without his hat on; scholarly, unmilitary, the red tabs on his uniform oddly incongruous like spurs on a don. 'Your Adjutant gives you a satisfactory report.' Satisfactory as far as it went, at least. Which was not all that far.

'Conscientious. Reliable. Knows his job.' The words had crackled through the static on the radio transceiver two days

before. 'Doesn't mix much. Not unpopular exactly. But not popular either. Bit of a dark horse. Keeps himself to himself.'

'Yes, sir,' Race said.

Maitland nodded, watching him. Watching was part of his job. Watching and listening and asking the right questions. Digging deeper had taken a little longer even with top priority signals. The reply from London had arrived only two hours ago. The details were sparse, incomplete, begging more questions than they answered. An orphan. Illegitimate. A surviving twin. Shuttlecocked from the age of ten between a maiden aunt and a minor boarding school. The aunt had died when he was seventeen. He had been alone in the world since then.

So who had the father been? And how much had his genes influenced the boy? What kind of traumas had been induced by the death of his twin brother? The loss of his mother at a susceptible stage in his development? What were his relationships with women, with other men, with authority? These were the unanswered questions; the raw material for the psychologists at the Training Camp to shape and refine. This was their province, not Maitland's. But the omens were good. He was convinced of that.

He said, 'How important to you is your job in the RAF? If the chance came to transfer into another Service would you take it?'

'The army?' If Race was surprised by the question he did not show it.

'Yes.'

Race looked at the insignia on Maitland's collar. 'Intelligence Corps?'

'That's what would go on your documents.'

The hint was plain enough. Race said, 'I'm not a good team man. I like to be . . . . .'

'On your own. Yes, I know.'

But do you know why? Race thought. Do you know what it's like to live with the mirror image of yourself for ten

years? To have someone always there, beside you, in your mind, thinking your thoughts, feeling your stresses, sharing everything? And then, suddenly, not to have him. To be only half-alive; a kind of emotional cripple. When that happens you have no choice but to draw in on yourself, protect what's left of your personality against further damage. With a scar that big you can't afford to be wounded again. Not by friendship. Not by love.

'What I have in mind,' Maitland said, 'would be very much a one man show. Complete freedom of action. Room to manoeuvre, to take the initiative. Room for almost anything except mistakes.' He sat back. 'Where did you pick up your Arabic?'

'I was with 101 MU when I first came out,' Race said. 'We employed a lot of native labour in the camp.' He shrugged. 'It just seemed easier to learn their language than to try to teach 'em English.'

'Do you read it, too?'

'No.'

'It's not important. They're mostly illiterate where you'd be going.' Maitland smiled. 'If you go.'

Race said nothing.

My God, these silences, Maitland thought. I bet they walk round you in the NAAFI like you were an unexploded bomb. Hardly a social asset. But it's something we can use. A weapon. A bonus. He said, 'The job carries commissioned rank, actually.'

'An officer?' For the first time Race betrayed anxiety.

'That worries you, does it?'

'I think it might.'

'I know. It used to worry me. Mess nights. Parades. The honour of the regiment. All that.' Maitland shook his head. 'Forget it. It's just a courtesy rank. To justify the responsibility. And the pay, of course. No self-respecting RSM would let you within a mile of a parade-ground. In any case, there's no rank where you'd be going. If you go.' He paused, realising

the conversation had turned full circle. 'Will you?' The direct question was perhaps a little premature. They still needed the answers to those hidden questions. But unless there was the basic will to accept commitment ferreting out the answers would be a waste of time.

'Do I have a choice?' Race's eyes were mocking.

'Certainly.'

'Twenty-one days in the glasshouse and RTU minus these?' Race touched the stripes on his sleeve.

'My dear chap - ' Maitland was shocked – 'we don't hold a pistol to people's heads here. Turn me down and you're back on leave. Only this time, wear your uniform and stay out of the bazaar. Please.'

Race said, 'The job's dangerous, isn't it?' Even staff officers who looked and talked like university professors did not give commissions away for nothing. There was always a snag.

Maitland met his eyes and said coolly, 'Bloody dangerous.'

Race nodded and said nothing.

After a moment or two Maitland said, 'It also entails a special kind of loneliness.'

Race smiled guardedly. 'You're offering me a one-way ticket, aren't you?'

'Am I?' Maitland shrugged. 'It's a possibility, I suppose. But only a possibility. With the training we can give you should be . . . .'

'Yes,' Race said casually, almost off-handedly.

Maitland raised his eyebrows. In his experience nobody was this cool. Unless . . . . He said, 'Is that: Yes, I understand? Or: Yes, I'll do it?'

Race looked surprised. 'Oh, I'm sorry, sir,' he said. 'I'll do it, of course.'

'OK,' Blade said. 'So what's the game?'

Race shook his head. 'Don't push it, Jack. This is more politics than soldiering.'

They were well up the wadi now, two men alone, the camp

behind them, the emptiness in front stretching away like a vast relief map, shadowed with time lost, ridged and furrowed with regret.

'No,' Blade said. 'I'm sorry. You'll have to do better than that.'

Race hesitated. 'All right. The war's running down quickly now. When it's over there's going to be a hell of a lot of sorting out to do. Especially in the Middle East. My job's just one small part of it.'

'Small but important,' Maitland had said. 'Vital, in fact. What happens in the fifties and sixties could well depend on your success or failure, Tom.'

Blade said bitterly, 'And that's it, is it? All you're going to say?'

'I've already said too much.'

'And if I don't buy it, any of it? If I take you back and . . . .?'

'I'm afraid I can't allow you to do that,' Race said evenly.

'I don't really think you can stop me.'

'Oh, I can stop you.' It was said quietly, without bravado and with immense conviction.

Blade remembered the scouts above the narrow entrance to the wadi, the carefully-sited Brownings, the armed men sitting round the cooking fires. He wondered how many more there were prudently hidden further up the wadi, waiting for Race's signal. 'Assuming that's true,' he said, 'and I don't for one moment believe it is – you can't prevent me from making my report. Telling them Sergeant Race has gone native. Killed Marak and taken his place and come up with some cock-and-bull story about secret agents and politics and God knows what crap. A bogus captain masquerading as a bogus sheik.'

'I don't advise you to do that.' Race's voice was suddenly curt. 'It was just bad luck you came on this patrol. An accident. Not worth dying for.'

'Wait a minute,' Blade said. 'Are you saying you'd kill me?'

'If I have to,' Race said flatly. 'Blow my cover in your report and I'm a dead man. It'll feed back down the grapevine that I'm an English imposter and every Bedu in the Hadramaut'll be out to chop me.' He shook his head. 'We've gone to a hell of a lot of trouble to get me here as Marak. I've already had to kill too many men. I don't want to kill any more. But if I have to, I will.'

'Including me?'

'Yes.'

'By God,' Blade said, shaken. 'You mean it, don't you?'

'It's a question of priorities,' Race said. 'In the game I'm playing there's only one rule - survive. Whatever it takes, however many other people have to die – survive.' They had been adamant about that in the Training Camp; had hammered it home in every lecture, demonstrated it in every on-the-ground exercise. Linguists, tacticians, muscle men – they had all said the same thing. Stay alive.

'Even if the other people are your friends?' Blade said. It was another face of war. One to which he was not accustomed.

'It's not for myself. It's for what I've come here to do.'

'The mission is all?'

'Something like that, yes.'

Blade said, 'And what is the mission?'

Race shook his head, remembering Maitland and the little room in GHQ ME. 'If I told you, you wouldn't believe me.'

They came to a low reef of rock breaking the smooth surface of the wadi floor. Race turned and sat down, drawing up his knees, settling his back against the rock. Blade looked down at him for a moment and then sat beside him. 'We could have bought it, all of us. You realise that?' he said. 'That night in the wadi when you took off and abandoned us.' The jackals, the quick-burning, quickly-dying fire. Pat crouched in terror against the dune wall behind them. 'We damned near did, too.'

'Yes?' Race's voice was polite, remote. The voice of a man who had closed the door on a memory, on many memories.

Close enough to touch, distant as a star, Blade thought. The way it had been on CATCHER. Just when you began to get through to him he'd switch off, climb down inside himself, pull the lid over his head and shut you out.

'I left it as late as I dared,' Race said. 'Until I knew Orange was near.'

'Not as near as you thought.'

'No?' Calmly, almost disinterestedly. 'Rough, was it?'

'Bloody rough.'

Race nodded. 'It's been rough for me, too, Jack,' he said remembering the Training Camp.

The camel track climbed and twisted through the dunes above the beach west of Damietta on the Delta coast. A fifteen mile loop that had everything: soft sand, pebble scree, steep-sided miniature wadis, salt pans. Race and Statham came off it an hour before sunset that afternoon, perched high in their sheepskin saddles, riding Bedu-style, gripping with their knees, their heels tucked up under their buttocks. They were dirty and running with sweat, naked under their ankle-length Bedu robes which clung wetly to their torsos above the bandoliers cinched round their waists. Their heads were blurred in a black mesh of flies hovering round their burnouses, settling now on their faces as the camels slowed to a lurching, hip-swivelling walk.

'Sit up, lad, for God's sake,' Statham said. The Training Camp's senior riding instructor, he was an old cavalryman from way back who had ridden with Allenby across Sinai as a boy bugler at the age of sixteen. Thin and tough, sharp-featured, with big, calloused hands, he was nicknamed The Centaur and rumoured to have been born with four legs. 'You're supposed to be a Bedu sheik not a bag of dirty bloody dhobi.'

Race braced himself wearily, taking up the slack of the

reins with his left hand, holding the heavy rifle chest-high in his right. The muscles of his right arm were numb, twitching with fatigue. With every jolting step the camel took the bruise on his coccyx stabbed pain viciously up his spine into his head. He had been three weeks in the Training Camp. Three weeks without a bath, without a change of clothes. Three weeks of concentrated, in-depth conditioning in which a variety of experts had re-stocked his mind as fast as the psychologists had emptied it. It was brain filtering rather than brain-washing; the re-arrangement of the basic building blocks of his personality, the amino-acids of his psyche around new, alien concepts. Language tuition, unarmed combat of unbelievable savagery, political orientation, Bedu etiquette, folk-lore, customs. And the camel track. Twice a day, every day, at first light and in the full, cruel heat of the afternoon – the camel track.

'Where you're going, son,' Statham said, 'they can ride twelve hours at a stretch in temperatures that'd make this place feel like bloody Alaska. And wipe out an oasis at the end of it. You've got to be able to eat in the saddle, sleep in the saddle.' He grinned. 'Do the other thing, too, if you can stomach the stink of the women.' He jabbed his riding crop into Race's ribs. 'Get that rifle up, damn you, and hold the bloody thing still. It's a weapon, not a bloody fairy's wand. You and the camel, you're nothing. Just a bloody gun platform. The machinery that gets a rifle on target in the right place at the right time. The rifle's everything in the desert. Justice, respect, power. The difference between staying alive and being jackal meat. You've got to be able to carry it one-handed half a bloody day and still hold the damned thing steady enough to clobber some poor bastard the first time he sticks his scabby head over the crest of a dune. Because if you miss him with your first shot, laddie, you won't get a second bloody chance.'

They rode into the compound behind the villa; in peacetime the seaside retreat of a wealthy pasha, now Maitland's

Training HQ. Race dug his toes into the sheepskin, leaning back and gripping with his knees as the camel went down by the head, hesitated and then folded its hindquarters clumsily under its belly. He straightened his right leg slowly, gritting his teeth, the cramped muscles griping, swung it over the pommel and dropped to the ground.

Statham grinned. 'Arse split right up to your bloody collar bone?'

Race nodded and walked stiffly to the camel's head. His legs were trembling, the inner surfaces of his thighs rubbed raw. The palm of his left hand was ridged where the thin reins had cut into it, the fingers of his right clawed from gripping the rifle. His eyes were red-rimmed, sore from the dust and sweat, his face tight under the mask of dirt. He knelt and hobbled his camel, hearing the rumble of wind in its guts, feeling its warm, rancid breath on his cheek. Standing up again, he stretched, easing the muscles in his shoulders. He put his hands in the small of his back and stamped his feet to get the circulation going.

Statham said, 'How's it coming?'

'OK.'

'Still pissing blood?'

'No.' The first few days in the saddle had pounded his kidneys and produced traces of blood in his urine. But that had cleared up, as Statham had predicted.

The sound of laughter drifted across the compound from the villa. Somebody put a record on the gramophone. The staff would be gathering for drinks before bathing and getting into mess kit for dinner. Race licked his lips, tasted muddy dust and spat on the sand.

'Hungry?' Statham said.

Race nodded, surprised to find that he was. Under the dirt and the chafing and the aching, cramp-knotted muscles his body was beginning to adapt, to re-assert its basic, healthy appetites, anticipating almost with pleasure the greasy mut-

ton and sour milk thick with curds which his stomach had rejected during the first two weeks.

Statham grinned and blew through compressed lips, contriving a passable imitation of a bugle. "Come water your horses and give 'em some corn." The old cavalry cookhouse call.

'To hell with the bloody horses,' Race said. 'Let's get stuck in.'

'That's my boy,' Statham said.

They turned their backs on the villa and began to walk away towards the armoury and the hut that housed the language laboratory and the black Bedu tent pitched in the hollow beyond.

Standing at the window of the ante-room in the villa Maitland watched them go. 'He looks in pretty good shape.' He turned to the man beside him. 'You happy about him, Freddie?'

Major Gill drank sparingly from his pewter tankard of beer. 'Reasonably happy, yes,' he said cautiously. Gill was a cautious man. Tall, heavily-built, balding, his eyes reserved behind thick-rimmed glasses, he looked, even in uniform, like the director of an important charity. He was, in fact, a clinical psychologist of unusual brilliance. 'Give us another month. Six weeks if you can. And we'll begin to see some results.'

'Yes.' Maitland hesitated. 'Well, actually, Freddie, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. The time factor.'

'Oh?'

'The thing is, we haven't got another month, I'm afraid.'

'I see,' Gill said in his slow, precise voice. 'And how long have we got, Charles?'

'As of today,' Maitland said, 'a week.'

'A week?'

'It's not enough?'

Gill shook his head. 'You know it's not.'

'Awkward,' Maitland said. 'I had a full session with our

masters in Cairo this morning. They want him posted out by tomorrow week.'

'But he's not ready, damn it,' Gill said. 'We've made a lot of progress these last few days. But he's nowhere near ready yet.'

'He's not going yet, Freddie. You've still got a week.'

Gill studied the rim of froth on his tankard. 'Think of it as a cumulative quiz,' he said. 'The climax is the sixty-four thousand dollar question. On that scale he's just about ready to tackle the eight-thousand dollar one.'

'So you'll have to push him a bit,' Maitland said. 'We've chosen his alter ego – the man he's going to replace. And . . . .'

'Not replace.' Gill said levelly. 'The man he's going to become. When Race leaves here he's not just going to stand in for a Bedu. He's going to be that Bedu.'

'Oh, quite. I realise that.'

'Do you?' Gill said. 'And do you also realise he's still basically an Englishman? All right, we've given him a veneer of Arab. But that's all it is. A veneer. If everything goes smoothly for him right down the line he could just about cope as he is now. But if something crops up unexpectedly, catches him on the wrong foot . . . .' He shrugged.

'I'm damned sorry, Freddie,' Maitland said. 'I'm as shaken as you are. But things are moving faster than we thought down there in the Hadramaut. You've got a maximum of seven days to put the finishing touches to him.'

Gill swallowed the last of his beer, set the tankard down carefully and said, 'This man you've chosen. What can you tell me about him? Name, background, personal quirks.'

'Come on, Freddie. You know better than to ask that. All I can tell you is that he's tailor-made for our purposes. An unknown quantity on the make.'

'Thanks,' Gill said. 'That's an enormous help.'

'Look,' Maitland said. 'It's not as bad as you think. Race will go to No. 5 DPG at Zubair. That's on the Gulf. We'll post

him in as a sergeant. With any sort of luck he'll have a bit of time with them first. Get the feel of the desert. Dig himself in.'

'As a British sergeant.'

'I know. I know it's not ideal. But . . . .'

'Ideal?' Gill shook his head. 'No, Charles, it's not. In fact it's bloody stupid. Who do those clowns in Cairo think I am? God?'

Maitland grinned. 'As I recall, it took Him six days to make a man. At least we're giving you longer than that.'

'Making is one thing. Starting from scratch with new materials. But re-making – that's another matter. And that's what I'm trying to do. Take a man the way he is, dismantle his personality and re-assemble him as somebody else.' He shook his head. 'You can rebuild a human mind and programme it. Saturate it with relevant information, feed in a series of protective, fail-safe mechanisms. What you can't do is anticipate every possible eventuality. Even a relatively primitive social structure like the Bedu's is far too complex for that.' He spread his hands. 'Given enough time you can go a long way towards achieving personality security. Get the odds down to something like manageable proportions. But we've had Race – what? Three weeks. And now you're saying we've only got another seven days. It's damned ridiculous.'

Maitland said, 'He's a good subject.'

'What's a good subject?' Gill said. 'All right, he's got a lot going for him. A surviving twin who never knew his father and saw his mother die. That gives him a certain strength. He understands about loneliness and a hostile environment.'

Maitland nodded. 'Exactly. Put him in an alien environment and he recognises it as being his natural habitat.'

'Very neat,' Gill said drily. 'A bit too neat, in fact. People aren't as tidy as that, Charles. Strength is not self-generating. It's a reaction to weakness. Which means that the ingredients of Race's character that appear to equip him for survival in

an alien environment are also the seeds of his weakness. He's learned how to arrest their growth, keep them dormant. But they're still there in his mind, his memory, his experience. And always will be.'

'You're beginning to lose me, Freddie,' Maitland said.

Gill smiled apologetically. 'Sorry. Look at it this way. An illegitimate orphan given a maiden aunt as a mother substitute and the company of small boys in a school dormitory to replace the twin brother he has lost. Would you call that a recipe for a stable personality?'

'He's a loner,' Maitland said. 'And that's what we need.'

Gill nodded, recognising the finality of the words. 'Yes, of course.'

It was dark outside now, the kneeling camels in the compound two black shadows on the sand. Somebody switched on the lights in the ante-room. Maitland saw himself reflected in the window, a stranger in uniform topped by his own familiar face. A stranger who made decisions based on orders; who, like Gill beside him, was commissioned to play God with other men's lives.

He said, 'Anything we can do to help, Freddie. If you want to scrap the schedule and concentrate on . . . .' On what? he thought. Weakness? Strength?

Gill said, 'We'll need a set piece. A make or break situation.'

'The sixty-four thousand dollar question?'

'Yes.'

Maitland nodded. 'OK. Let me know what you want and we'll lay it on.'

'And if he muffs it? Comes up with the wrong answer?'

'He still goes, Freddie,' Maitland said. 'The wheels are turning now. We can't stop 'em.'

'That's what I thought,' Gill said.

They set it up a week later in the Miramar.

The Miramar was Damietta's only nightclub, built by the pasha before the war to amuse and entertain his friends. It

was a curious structure with glass walls and a glass roof, iron-framed, with a dance-floor and a small orchestra stand. At night, full-length striped curtains were drawn around the walls and a number of small electric moons, suspended from the roof girders, shone among the stars visible through the glass. The place was furnished with cane tables and chairs provided with faded red velvet cushions. There were potted palms on low wicker stands strategically placed to screen the door into the kitchen. The general effect was slightly bizarre in an old-fashioned, genteel sort of way; a tea-room at the end of the pier in an English seaside town circa 1925, completely enclosed by giant striped Punch and Judy booths.

On Race's last night at the Training Camp they took over the Miramar and gave him dinner there. The tables were pushed together to make two long ones facing each other across the dance floor. Race sat with the officers. The W.O's and sergeants were opposite. He had bathed, shaved and had his hair trimmed and was dressed in a clean set of khaki drill with the three pips of a captain on the epaulettes. It was the first decent meal he had eaten since the night he had been picked up in the restaurant in Cairo; melon followed by coq-au-vin. A variety of wines. And a magnificent pudding made of meringue and fruit in heavy syrup and ice cream. The atmosphere was relaxed. The lights gleamed on the silver cutlery. The table napkins were of white linen lightly starched. A five-piece orchestra played English/American music during the meal.

'More wine, Tom?' Maitland said.

'Thank you.' Race watched his glass being refilled. The condemned man ate a hearty breakfast, he thought. Tomorrow it'll be bully beef and tinned cheese in an EPI tent outside Zubair. Flies in the tea, sand on the deck. And onion-flavoured beer in the canteen. And after that . . . . He swallowed a spoonful of pudding, tasting under its cold sweetness the greasy, maggoty stew and thick milk curds of the Bedu diet they had been feeding him for a month.

Watching him carefully, Gill said, 'Everything all right, Tom?'

Race nodded. 'Kweis kateer,' he said affably, casually. He was right through Gill and out the other side; from the suspicious, resentful, leave-me-alone-for-God's-sake stage, through the dependent, can't-do-without-you stage to the I-don't-need-you-now stage. On equal terms. Even faintly patronising. He sat back in his chair while the waiter removed his plate. The man's sleeve brushed his shoulder. Gill saw the quick flash of irritation in those bold, dark eyes, the arrogance in the tilt of his chin. And was comforted. We've put him back together again, he thought. He's going to be all right.

They were drinking coffee when the dancer came on, heralded by a clash of cymbals as the music changed. She was in her late thirties, bare-footed and bare-breasted, wearing only a short, beaded skirt set low on her hips and a paste jewel in her navel. Her figure was full, running to fat, with heavy breasts, broad hips and thick, crêpe-skinned thighs. Her black hair, shining with grease, fell over her shoulders to the small of her back. The kohl on her eyelids stood out starkly against her white-powdered face. Her mouth and finger nails were painted dark red, her nipples rouged.

She moved slowly across the floor in the U of the tables, the officers on her left, the NCO's on her right. Her hips jerked alarmingly in time to the music. The jewel in her navel winked like a misplaced eye. The beaded skirt swung against her thighs, the strands parting to expose glimpses of her buttocks. Her fingers fluttered with a kind of genteel elegance. Her lips were parted in a frozen, gap-toothed smile.

They looked at her with amused embarrassment, at once fascinated and repelled. It was as if one of the middle-aged ladies in the Palm Court orchestra of a Bournemouth hotel had laid aside her cello, taken off most of her clothes and begun to wriggle and posture in front of them.

She crossed the floor towards the table opposite Race,

pulling her shoulders back, shaking her breasts at the NCO's. A large varicose vein stood out behind her left knee. Her feet were broad and flat, the skin on her heels calloused.

The sergeants and warrant officers welcomed her with rhythmic clapping and wolf whistles, watching her over a thicket of empty bottles. Mellowed by wine and good food they saw only what they wished to see; a half-naked woman flaunting herself for their pleasure.

She swung round, the ridiculous skirt spreading like a fan, strutted across the floor, spread her legs in front of Maitland and began to move her stomach in and out. The paste jewel in her navel flashed, disappeared in rolls of fat and flashed again as her belly muscles contracted and relaxed. She was sweating now, the kohl round her eyes beginning to smudge and run. She sank slowly on to her heels, leaning far back, her hair brushing the floor behind her. Her hips gyrated, her breasts rolled slackly.

'Dear God,' Maitland said softly.

Gill was smiling a small, secret smile. He had it all worked out. The explicit sexual posture of the spread thighs. The unsubtle invitation of the jewelled navel. The unbound hair, the naked breasts with their rouged nipples. The stylised, almost prim movements of her fingers.

He glanced at Race. 'You'll see nothing like this in the Hadramaut,' he said quietly. 'Modesty is the Bedu's middle name.'

Race nodded, his face expressionless, his eyes fixed on the dancer's navel. Watching him, Gill wondered professionally if Race had ever surprised his maiden aunt naked in her bath. There was something about his eyes. Disgust, perhaps? Affront? Yes, Gill decided, she affronts him, offends him with her crudity.

He thought it was a satisfactory reaction.

The music rose to a frenzied crescendo and stopped abruptly, matching the dancer's simulated climax. She lay quivering for a moment, arched on her shoulders and knees,

her pelvis thrust up, the red-nailed hands lifting her breasts in a gesture of submission. Then she rose to her feet nodding and bowing as the applause began, backing away towards the NCO's table. One of the sergeants stood up as she approached, leaned over the table and smacked her bottom playfully. The applause exploded in a great shout of laughter. The dancer spun round angrily and shook her fist at the grinning faces, rubbing her bottom with her other hand. The man who had smacked her stood with his arms extended invitingly, his lips puckered as for a kiss. Race recognised him as being one of the radio technicians from the Camp; a slight, foxy man called Bowditch, freckled and bony, with a bush of sandy hair.

'Come on, darlin',' Bowditch shouted. 'Tala hinna, ya helwa.'

The orchestra had begun to play again. The sound filtered faintly through the uproar as the men stamped their feet and pounded the table with their fists, shaking the wine bottles, rattling the glasses.

Race tensed in his chair, detecting a certain dangerous excitement behind the laughter. He saw the dancer now for what she was. Not an erotic symbol, a sexual tease. Just a tired, overweight woman in an absurd skirt, out of breath and sweating, battered by the noise, without dignity.

She stepped up to the table, put her hands flat on the cloth, leaned close to Bowditch and spat in his face. The laughter died as if it had been switched off. In the sudden silence Bowditch said loudly, 'You bitch. You bloody Gyppo whore.'

Gill felt Maitland shift uneasily beside him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Greek manager appear from behind the screen of potted palms. His mind ticked off another item on his private agenda.

The woman stepped back quickly as Bowditch made a grab for her. He kicked his chair away and ran down behind the table towards the orchestra stand. The musicians sat silent, clutching their instruments nervously. He rounded the end

of the table and stopped, facing the woman across the dance floor, his arms spread to prevent her from passing him. A strand of her spittle hung from his chin. He shook it off, his eyes disgusted. 'Right, you pox-ridden bint,' he said. 'You've asked for it. Now you're damned well going to get it.' He moved out into the middle of the floor between the tables and beckoned her. 'Tala hinna,' he said, his voice dangerously soft. 'Come to me, you fat bitch.'

Maitland turned his head towards Gill, his eyes questioning. Gill smiled tightly and shook his head. The ticks on his mental agenda were multiplying steadily.

Bowditch took a slow pace forward, stalking the woman, enjoying her fear. The men at the NCO's table began to clap in unison. The officers sat silent. The woman cowered back, turned to run, slipped and went down on her hands and knees. Bowditch grinned as a shout of laughter and cheering exploded down the table on his right.

'For God's sake, Freddie,' Maitland said urgently. 'Is all this really . . . ?'

Gill put a hand on his arm and frowned, watching Bowditch, watching the Greek.

Bowditch moved quickly, put his foot squarely on the woman's upturned rump and shoved hard. She sprawled heavily on her stomach, rolled over and lay with her hands raised protectively in front of her face. Through the greasy curtain of her hair her eyes stared up at him, glazed, dilated.

The clapping was loud and steady now, like the throb of a giant pulse. Bowditch stood over the woman, reached down with his left hand and grabbed a fistful of her hair. He jerked her head up, clenched his right fist and lifted it.

Behind him, the Greek moved like a cat. He snatched up an empty bottle, gripped it by the neck and smashed it down on the edge of the table. The crash of splintering glass cut through the clapping and stopped it abruptly. Bowditch's head came up and round. He let go of the woman's hair, turned quickly and crouched, feet apart, arms swinging

loosely at his sides. There was a sudden shine of sweat on his face and his lips were drawn back and his eyes focused on the jagged circle of glass in the Greek's hand. 'Hey, Steedie,' he said thickly. 'You want a slice of the cake, too?' He began to crab towards the Greek, sliding his feet on the polished floor, edging over to his right away from that jagged bottle. The glass shards gleamed wetly in the lights, seeming to grow out of the Greek's fist.

The men watched, officers and NCO's alike silent now, sensing the change in the atmosphere from vulgar horseplay to something much more deadly.

The Greek waited, his face impassive, his black eyes quick. He was no taller than Bowditch but built like a brick wall. Under his white shirt his shoulders were wide and solid, his chest as deep as a well. His neck bulged over his collar. The muscles in his thighs bulged under his tight black trousers.

'Come on now, Steedie,' Bowditch said. 'What's this fat bitch to you, eh?' He was working his way round in a circle, looking for a way in, goading the Greek to make a move. The Greek pivoted slowly, facing him, measuring the shortening distance between them.

'She's a cow, Steedie,' Bowditch said. He was breathing deeply, sucking air down into his lungs, hungry for oxygen to clear his brain of wine fumes. 'Just a fat, dirty cow. You don't want her sort, mate. Good-looking chap like you. You want a nice young bint with . . . .' He darted in at the Greek, throwing his left arm up and outwards to distract the man's eyes, his right arm stiff and straight in front of him, the fingers extended, aiming for the Greek's face.

The Greek side-stepped, bringing the broken bottle up in an arcing lunge. Bowditch dropped on one knee and tilted his head. The vicious spikes of glass sliced the air above his shoulder. His right hand, bunched now into a fist, drove into the Greek's stomach. The Greek jerked back, sucking his stomach in, taking the force out of the punch. He moved quickly into the middle of the floor.

The tables were covered with a series of overlapping cloths. Bowditch whipped one of them off, to a crash of breaking glass, and wrapped it round his left forearm, got to his feet and rushed at the Greek like a bull. And like a matador, the Greek turned on the balls of his feet. Bowditch crashed past him into the table. The sharp edge slammed into his ribs and drove the air out of his lungs. The Greek was on him in a flash, the fingers of his left hand hooking into the bush of sandy hair, wrenching Bowditch's head back, twisting him to bring his face round. The Greek raised the broken bottle, his lips drawn back in a snarl.

Race's chair crashed over backwards as he stepped on to the table, jumped down and crossed the floor in two leaping strides. He thrust his right arm up under the Greek's armpit and round the back of his neck, jabbing his middle finger deep into the Greek's left ear.

The Greek released his hold on Bowditch and swung the broken bottle up and back, striking blindly for Race's face. Race ducked his head behind the Greek's shoulder and tightened the pressure of his right arm. The Greek bowed his head and jack-knifed, stepping backwards, swinging his torso round. Race was catapulted over his left shoulder to smash down on his back on the floor. He slid on the polished wood, arms spread, fingers clawing for a grip. He half-rolled, came up on one knee and saw the Greek waiting with the bottle in his hand. Bowditch was out of it, crumpled in a heap on the table, his lungs empty, whooping for breath. It was between the two of them now.

Race squatted on his heels, finger tips splayed on the floor, head up, watching, waiting. The Greek came in fast, leaning forward, the bottle scything the air. Race jinked right, throwing himself flat, rolling and coming up on his feet in one smooth blur of movement. He reached behind him with his right hand, groping for a weapon. A bottle. A table knife. Anything.

Gill reached into the waistband of his trousers, pulled out

a curved Bedu dagger and slid it across the table. Race's fingers closed over the hilt.

'Go get him, Tom,' Gill said softly. 'Murder the bastard.'

Race began to shuffle towards the Greek, flat-footed, the knife flicking from hand to hand. His head was thrust forward, his stomach drawn in tightly, his eyes holding the eyes of the Greek. He felt cool and loose, his brain clear, the hard training of the past month suddenly relevant, encasing him like armour.

They circled each other, feinting and lunging, knife and broken bottle weaving an intricate pattern between them. There was no sound but the rasp of their breath and the squeak of their shoes on the polished floor. To the watchers at the tables the blur of thrust and counter-thrust was almost too quick for the eye to follow. But Race saw it all in a kind of slow motion, the way a batsman sees the ball when his eye is in. The glass shards swung lazily towards him giving him all the time in the world to avoid them. Within thirty seconds he knew he could take the Greek.

He switched the knife to his left hand and took a half-pace forward, intending to aim a kick at the Greek's genitals. His right foot came down on the wooden floor, his left already committed to the kick. But there was something under the sole of his right shoe. Something small and round and unstable. One of the beads from the dancer's skirt. It rolled up towards his heel and threw him. He went down heavily on his back, his head hitting the floor with an audible crack. Momentarily dazed he saw the wavering bulk of the Greek loom above him, huge and menacing, blocking out the electric moons and the distant, glass-distorted stars. He heard the Greek's sharp hiss of breath, knew the broken bottle was coming, twisted desperately to his right and gasped in agony as the Greek's left knee, with all his weight behind it, dug into his groin. The glass spikes smashed into the floor an inch from his head. He brought his knees up sharply into the Greek's stomach and rolled clear.

The Greek was kneeling, double-up, his head down, his hand still clamped round the neck of the bottle – a useless weapon now that the jagged shards had snapped off into the floor. Race drew his legs up under him, launched himself bodily at the Greek and toppled him on to his back. His vision was clearing now. He was soaked in sweat and his legs felt heavy and hollow and the breath sobbed and gurgled in his throat. But the knife was still in his hand, his brain still clicking over the multi-cogged wheels of his training. He straddled the Greek, pinning him to the floor with his knees, reversed the knife so that the needle-point curved downwards and raised it high.

'Now,' Gill muttered tensely. 'Now, man. Finish it. Finish it.' This was the last, the vital item on his mental agenda. The one that counted. The one it had all been designed to achieve.

Race looked down at the Greek's face. Saw the mouth slack, gulping air, the black eyes dazed, the sweat oily on the blue-skinned jaw. He felt his brain switch back into slow motion, brought the knife down in a leisurely, smooth-curving arc, straightening his back as he did so to pack maximum power behind the stroke.

The blade of the knife pierced the Greek's shirt just above the heart, met the padded, thin-plated flak vest he wore beneath it and broke off at the hilt. The Greek grunted and smiled. Race sat back on his heels, his thighs gripping the Greek's hips, and stared in bewilderment at the hilt in his hand.

'Well done, Tom. Bloody well done,' Gill said. And he was helping Race to his feet and reaching to shake his hand and smiling.

Race looked at him blankly, turned the hilt of the knife in his hand and saw the clean edge of the quarter-inch of blade still left.

'We cut it three-parts through,' Gill said.

'You did what?' Race said.

Gill grinned. 'Steedie's a nice guy. We didn't want any accidents.'

Race was breathing hard, the sweat dripping off his chin. 'You mean you had it all planned? It was a bloody put-up job?'

Gill heard the surprise in his voice. And something more. Something he wanted to hear. Disappointment. Frustration. 'A set piece,' he said. 'To round off your training.'

The Greek was on his feet now, grinning happily, surrounded by members of the Training Camp staff. Someone thrust a drink in his hand.

'I could use one of those,' Race said.

Bowditch came up with a couple of glasses and gave him one. 'No hard feelings Cap'n?'

'What?' Race gulped some whisky. 'Oh. No. No hard feelings.' Just a sense of being robbed. A kind of hunger.

The dancer was there too. Wearing a flowered housecoat, her hair tied back neatly, her face wiped clean of makeup. Race looked at her, suddenly shy, remembering how she had looked in the beaded skirt.

Watching him, Gill said, 'Nice lass.'

'Yes.' Race tipped the rest of the whisky into his mouth.

'Reminds you of somebody, does she?'

'Her?' Race shook his head. 'God, no.' It was said vehemently. Too vehemently.

You're lying, Gill thought. And was willing to bet that in Race's memory his aunt always wore a housecoat and no makeup. 'I'm sorry we had to spring this on you,' he said. 'But I had to be sure, you see.'

Race looked at him bleakly. 'Are you sure now?'

An hour later, sitting over a nightcap with Gill in the empty ante-room at the villa, Maitland asked the same question.

The psychologist shrugged. 'More or less.' He hesitated, staring at the amber liquid in his glass. 'It's just that Steedie's a Greek. Not one of us. Not English.'

'And that worries you?' Maitland said.

'It does a bit, yes.' Gill held the glass in both hands, turning it slowly. Behind the spectacles his eyes were thoughtful. 'If it had been one of us. Bowditch, say. Or Statham. Or you, even. D'you think he'd have still used the knife? At the end, when he'd got his man down and the fight was as good as over. If it had been one of his own kind lying there, d'you think he'd have still stabbed him?'

'Do you?'

'I don't know, Charles. I honestly don't know. I wish to God I did.'

'What you're really saying is that you need more time with him. Right?'

'Perhaps,' Gill said slowly. He looked up and smiled. 'If it takes six days to make an Adam, how long does it take to make a Cain?'

.

The wind down the wadi was noticeably colder. Race shivered and stood up. 'What's the time?'

Blade looked at his watch. 'Coming up to midnight.'

'We should perhaps be getting back,' Race said. 'Hansell will be starting to twitch.'

'And your men getting restless?'

'It's been known. The Bedu are like their camels – easily spooked.'

They began to walk back slowly. After a moment or two Race said, 'That girl – the nurse. Pat, wasn't it?'

'Yes.'

'She's – all right?'

'Yes,' Blade said. 'She's fine.'

Race heard the warmth in his voice, a kind of proud shyness. 'Like that, is it?'

'No thanks to you.'

'No. Still, I'm glad. Very glad. She's a . . . .'

'Nice girl. Yes, I know.'

'You're damned lucky,' Race said. There was sincerity in

his voice and also a kind of envy. As if he were contemplating a world he could never inhabit.

Blade looked at the palm trees by the wells, the black humped tents, the water shining in the starlight. Beyond, dark shadows on the grey-white sand, the trucks of Orange clustered in their defensive laager. He visualised it without the trucks, the way it would be tomorrow when they had gone. Flies, dirt, the stink of goats. The black-veiled women. The coarse, monotonous food, the long-barrelled rifles, the knives, the lice in the blankets. The lean, watchful men with their greasy hair and suspicious eyes. The boredom, the quarrels, the intricate, deadly etiquette of Bedu society. The poverty, the short life-span, the dirt, the flies.

The picture oozed like a dark stain over his mind slowly obliterating the clean memories of the white beaches at Alexandria, the flowers among the tables of the café terrace, the little flat above the harbour, Pat's arms reaching for him, Pat's eyes smiling. Who would deliberately turn his back on such a world for the arid reality of the Wadi Dugri? What kind of courage enabled a man to accept such dangerous loneliness?

He said, 'It isn't going to work, y'know. You've been lucky so far but it can't last.'

'Let me worry about that,' Race said. 'The question is, do I also have to worry about that report you're going to make?'

'A question of trust?'

'Yes. But I have to know.' It was partly a plea, partly a threat.

'You'll accept my word?' Blade said.

'Yes. My masters would blow a fuse if they knew. But – yes, I'll accept your word.'

'Damn the report,' Blade said. 'I ought to take you in. Threats or no threats. I have my orders too, y'know.'

'But you won't?' And now it was all plea.

'I don't know,' Blade said.

They walked in silence then. Five yards. Ten.

'Maitland mentioned the possibility of a jihad,' Blade said. 'Is that why you're here?'

'Did he?' Race said. And shut his mouth tight.

'How long d'you plan to stay?'

'As long as it takes.'

Blade nodded. The plea was there, but also determination, commitment. He understood that the plea was for himself, for his own life. Not for Race's. 'OK.' He stood still and looked at Race. 'Thou art Abu Marak, sheik of the Hadramaut,' he said in Arabic. And added in English, 'God help you.'

'And this will appear in your report?'

'Yes.'

Race held out his hand. 'Thanks, Jack.' It was a slightly theatrical gesture out there on the wadi floor, a touch of gipsy bravura, mannered, embarrassing. But somehow, to them both, it seemed entirely natural.

Blade gripped his hand. 'Yehia el Marak – long life to thee, Marak.'

'Aleikum as salaam, ya Sidi,' Race said. He smiled, his teeth white in the black beard. 'And make an honest woman of that nice girl.'

They drove out the next morning. The women gathered by the side of the track to sing them on their way as was the custom for those who came in strength and left in friendship. Their thin, shrill voices floated up to the high rocks above the narrow gorge where the scouts stood against the sky, their rifles held above their heads in salute. The other men grouped themselves formally behind Race, touching forehead, lips and breast in farewell.

Blade sat beside Hansell in the fifteen-hundredweight and watched the patrol uncoil itself out of the laager and drive up into the gorge. As the last three-tonner pulled into line Hansell raised his hand in salute to Race and slotted the truck neatly in behind it. Blade twisted round in his seat looking

back. Already the Bedu were beginning to drift away to the tents. But Race stood fast, feet apart, hands on the hilt of his knife. The striped robe made him look taller than he was. Tall and lonely and vulnerable. Blade raised his arm. Race's hand went up in a gesture of – what? Gratitude? Hope? Or just goodbye?

The high walls closed around them, the dust beginning to eddy as the trucks picked up speed. On the flat steel deck of the fifteen-hundredweight the Brownings were trained fore and aft, the canvas covers laced on, the twin barrels pointing straight at Race. That was how they left him, how they last saw him, half-hidden in the swirling dust with the guns trained on him. Then the gorge curved and he was gone.

12

Seven weeks later Alec Squires' patrol, A Apple, lost a man.

His name was Mitchell. LAC Freddie Mitchell; a thin, muscular, even-tempered man who pulled his weight quietly and without fuss, had twice been offered corporal's tapes and twice refused them. He picked up a spade one morning after breakfast, walked out of the laager and disappeared.

Apple was in Dawasir territory, heading north on the homeward run along the western edge of the Empty Quarter. It was bad country, humped and fissured; a place of cross-winds and sudden, violent dust-storms, the dunes forever shifting and changing shape. A man could get lost in it less than half a mile from his truck. As Mitchell did.

They were out in full strength; thirty-two men distributed among the trucks. It was SOP for them to switch places with each other from day to day. It helped to keep the conversation going over the long, empty miles. Which was why nobody missed Mitchell until they stopped to brew up at 10.00 hours. They were up near Sulaiyil then, a hundred miles nearer Base. Squires organised a defensive laager and sent one of his fifteen-hundredweights and a three-tonner back to look for Mitchell. But when they returned just before sunset they had not found him.

'Damned fool,' Squires said, grieving. Angry and frustrated and grieving. Everybody had liked Mitchell. 'It's a bloody lonely way to buy it.'

But Mitchell had not bought it. Nor was he alone. It would have been better for him if he had been.

He knelt on the sand in a hollow in the dunes surrounded by the mounted scouts of a bin Rashid raiding party. His arms and legs were tightly roped, his wrists tied behind him to his ankles. In the last light of the afternoon his face was drawn, haggard, sweated out. He was bare-headed, his hair gritty with sand, his eyes red-rimmed. He was dehydrated and running a temperature and no longer thinking very clearly. Flies buzzed round his head, clustered like sores at the corners of his mouth and eyes. He looked up at the faces of the bin Rashid and felt fear knot in his guts like cramp. He understood nothing of what they were saying, the Arabic words a meaningless jumble of sounds in his mind. But he knew he was going to die. Their eyes told him that.

The bin Rashid were pure-bred Bedu, the aristocrats of the Empty Quarter, living in the hot wastes west of Oman, north of the Hadramaut where other Bedu tribes went only to raid. Men without pity, honed by the sand and the salt, greedy for camels and goats, contemptuous of human life.

'Shoot the dog,' one of them said. 'He is of no value.'

Salim bin Ghaba shook his head. A man of medium height, thin as a whip and as vicious, with the Bedu hooked nose and the black Bedu eyes, bin Ghaba was the leader. Framed in the striped burnous of his tribe his face was lean and hard, the thin-lipped mouth twisted by a scar that curved upwards across his right cheek to the corner of his eye. 'He comes by the hand of Allah whose name be ever-blessed,' he said. 'Our key to the Wadi Dugri. With him we will open Marak's door.'

'A present for Marak?'

Bin Ghaba nodded. 'Have I not said so?'

They looked down at Mitchell. There were twelve of them, sitting easily in their camel saddles, heavily armed with knives and guns, each man wearing two bandoliers. Three miles away across the dunes the main force waited; sixty

fighting men pledged to rid the desert of Abu Marak and his Maaruf Saar.

'And what will Marak do with such a gift?' one of them said doubtfully.

Bin Ghaba shrugged. 'Give him to the women and offer us hospitality.' He smiled, his upper lip curling. 'After we have eaten his food, Marak will be ours for the taking. He and all his tribe.'

Mitchell heard the murmur of assent, focused with difficulty on bin Ghaba's face and saw his death sentence there.

'Give him water now,' bin Ghaba said.

'The women of Marak will give him plenty of water.'

The bin Rashid laughed, slapping their thighs delightedly.

Bin Ghaba nodded. 'Then let us make sure he is alive to drink it.'

It was mid-morning when they came to the Wadi Dugri, the camels of the twelve scouts pacing easily across the sand, the main force tucked away in the dunes within striking distance. For Mitchell it had been a long and terrible night slung across the saddle of the pack camel, head dangling down on one side, feet on the other. When they stopped about a mile from the mouth of the wadi, within sight of Marak's sentries on the high rocks above the gorge, he was flaccid as a rag doll, his muscles cramped and useless, his ribs and stomach aching from the jolting. They got him off the pack camel, tied his wrists together in front of him, thrust a long-barrelled rifle through the crook of his elbows and across his shoulder-blades, hoisted him between two riders and carried him in agony across the sand, lifting him high in the morning sunlight for the sentries to see.

Riding a little ahead and to one side, Salim bin Ghaba circled his camel once and called out in the hot silence. 'We bring an Ingleez spy to my lord Abu Marak.'

'Ingleez, Ingleez,' the bin Rashid chanted and halted, tense,

ready to break and ride, listening to the voices of the sentries echoing back down the gorge, waiting for the reply.

'Come in peace.' The Arabic words floated out to them as the sentries grounded their rifles in welcome. The door was open.

The bin Rashid rode on into the gorge, two abreast, knee-to-knee, the smell of their sweat sharp with the taint of mistrust. Three miles to the north-east, lying prone on the crest of a dune, one of their kind watched them go in and signalled down to the main force that Marak had taken the bait.

On the edge of the oasis they dropped Mitchell on the sand, letting him slide off the rifle barrel. He fell awkwardly, no feeling in his legs, his shoulders wrenched and cracking with pain. They got the camels down and dismounted, untied Mitchell's ankles but left his wrists bound. They put a rope halter round his neck, hauled him to his feet and began to drag him through the trees towards the big tent where Race was waiting. Weak and light-headed, Mitchell staggered erratically over the sand, his knees buckling. Only the halter pulled tight held him upright. Grouped by the wells the women watched him, yelping with excited laughter, knowing he was theirs, impatient to have him.

Inside the tent, one of the bin Rashid put his foot in the small of Mitchell's back and sent him sprawling in front of Race. His head snapped back cruelly as the halter jerked him to his knees. Race's jaw tightened as he saw the sudden, astonished gleam of recognition in Mitchell's eyes. Apple had been his patrol, Mitchell one of his crews.

'Hullo, Sarge,' Mitchell croaked. And he toppled forward and blacked out.

When he came to he was sitting with his back to one of the tent poles. There was a rope cinched round his waist, another pulled taut across his throat. His arms were stretched above his head, the wrists tied together and roped to the pole. In the darkness behind his eyelids the Bedu were talking.

'. . . . or did thine Ingleez friends take away thy manhood in exchange for a sten gun?' That was bin Ghaba, sneering, taunting.

Race scowled. 'Watch thy tongue, Salim bin Ghaba. Doubtless thou art a lion among thy jackals. But this is an affair of men.'

Bin Ghaba's eyes flickered. 'Or of women.'

The men squatting in the tent grunted their agreement. 'Give him to the women.'

'Is it not the custom among true Bedu?' bin Ghaba said, gently emphasising the word 'true', his eyes holding Race's.

'Aywah,' the men chorused. 'It is the custom.'

Race glanced quickly at Mitchell. So it begins again, he thought bitterly. The killing. The weighing of one life against many. 'Not the women,' he said, his voice flat and hard. 'If he must die . . . .'

'Thou knowest he must die,' bin Ghaba said.

Mitchell heard their voices as if from a great distance, muffled in the mists of his mind. He forced his eyes open and looked at Race. 'For God's sake, Sarge.' The words were thready, no more than a whisper. 'What the hell's this all . . . . ?'

Race shut his ears, walled off his mind against Mitchell. You pressed a tit and the bombs fell and killed people. You pushed home the plunger and the charge detonated and killed people. But you didn't have to look at their faces, hear their bewildered, accusing voices, see in their eyes the betrayal of trust. He said, 'Then I will shoot him.'

Bin Ghaba raised his eyebrows. 'Shoot him?'

'Yes.'

Bin Ghaba shrugged elaborately. 'A waste of a bullet. But it is thy decision, ya Sidi.'

They cut Mitchell down from the tent pole, put the halter round his neck again and dragged him outside, through the trees, out on to the open wadi floor. Sensing their intention, the disappointed women began to shriek in protest.

'Give me the rope,' Race said, the women's voices shrilling in his ears. Bin Ghaba gave it to him, his scarred face smiling mockingly, without humour. Race had his sten gun in the crook of his elbow. He left the Bedu standing bunched together, his men and the bin Rashid united in their eagerness to see Mitchell killed. Leading Mitchell by the halter he walked on slowly, thirty yards, fifty, sixty.

'Bloody hell, Sarge, what're you . . . . ?'

'Shut up,' Race said, keeping his voice low, speaking now in English. The wadi opened out in front of them, empty of cover. The rocks at the foot of the southern wall were perhaps a hundred yards away and might as well have been a hundred miles. Race stopped, lifted the halter over Mitchell's head and said, 'I'm damned sorry, Mitch,' not looking at him, standing beside him with his back to the Bedu, staring ahead up the wadi.

Mitchell turned to speak.

'No,' Race said quickly. 'Keep your face away from them.'

'You're you're not going to chop me?' Mitchell said.

Race heard the disbelief in his voice. 'It's that or the women,' he said and braced himself, expecting Mitchell to argue, plead. When he did neither Race said again, 'I'm sorry.'

'Bugger that,' Mitchell said. 'There's two of us. You've got the sten. We could . . . .'

'No,' Race said. 'That way we'd both go to the women.'

'Those men with you,' Mitchell said. 'They'll clobber the bin Rashid if you . . . .'

'It's not like that,' Race said. 'Not at this moment. Saar and bin Rashid – they're all Bedu. And they want you dead. You're English. Less than a dog. And they want to see you die.'

'My life for yours?' Mitchell said bitterly. 'Is that it?'

'If you like,' Race said. Impossible to explain in a few words, a moment or two, what had been planned so carefully in Cairo, budgeted for, calculated. How do you talk political

expediency to a man facing death at the hand of his friend?

'You're a bastard, Race,' Mitchell said. 'A deserter and a bastard. Gutless as . . .'

'I want you to run for it, Mitch.'

'I'll bet you do,' Mitchell said. 'That's your way, isn't it? A bullet in the back.'

'It's the best way,' Race said. Why did it have to be Mitchell? Somebody he knew, had shared patrols with? 'I'll make it quick.'

'Yeh,' Mitchell said. 'You do that, Buster.' And he ducked and turned, pivoting on the ball of his right foot, ramming his shoulder into Race's stomach. Race gasped, jerking forward. Mitchell grabbed the sten and swung the metal butt up sharply into Race's face. Race's head went up, blood spurting from his nose and mouth. Mitchell brought the sten down hard, chopping behind Race's left ear. Race went down in a crumpled heap. Mitchell stepped over him, bringing the sten round, cushioning it against his hip, aiming at the Bedu. 'Come on, you black-arsed bastards,' he yelled, flicked the cocking lever to RAPID FIRE and squeezed the trigger.

The staccato hammer of the sten was loud in the wadi, a kettle-drum tattoo under the whine of the bullets. The Bedu broke, diving away, the bullets spraying into them. Mitchell started to run towards them, weaving and jinking, his boots pounding on the hard sand, the muzzle of the sten swinging from side to side. Behind him, Race rolled over, spat blood out of his mouth and blinked himself back into full consciousness. The drumming of the sten stopped abruptly as the magazine emptied. Race lifted his head and saw Mitchell reverse the weapon, still running, gripping it now by the barrel. Saw bin Ghaba standing coolly among the crouching Bedu raise his rifle and fire. The soft-nosed bullet took Mitchell full in the face at point blank range and blew his head away. He slumped in mid-stride, blood spouting from the severed arteries, and pitched forward. The Bedu ran to stand over him, shouting and stamping their feet, firing shot

after shot into the headless trunk, their faces contorted with hatred and blood lust, until Mitchell was no longer a man, nor even the corpse of a man; only a bloodied, tattered bundle of torn flesh and rags and splintered bone on the bullet-pocked sand.

Race pulled himself up on to hands and knees and vomited blood and bile. Their fury spent, the Bedu turned away, walking back towards the tents past the bodies of those Mitchell had killed with the sten. But bin Ghaba waited, standing casually beside the mangled corpse, his rifle tucked under his arm. Race got to his feet and walked slowly towards him.

Bin Ghaba said, 'It would have been better to have given him to the women, Abu Marak.' He jerked his head towards the dead Bedu. 'Thou hast the blood of the bin Rashid on thy hands this day.'

Race turned his head and blew blood and mucus out of his broken nose between finger and thumb, breathed in deeply through his mouth and stooped to retrieve his sten gun. He snapped in a fresh magazine and said coldly, 'If thy children are ill-trained and slow, their blood is on thy hands, not mine.'

Bin Ghaba's twisted smile approved the answer. He put out his left hand and touched Race's shoulder, sliding his arm round the back of Race's neck, turning to walk back with him to the tents. 'It is of little consequence.' He stepped over the body of one of his men as one might step over a puddle. 'Life is for those who live, is it not so?' It was the philosophy of the Empty Quarter where tears were as scarce as rain, where no prisoners were ever taken nor mercy shown. Hard rather than callous, forged in the hot sun, the cruel sand. Death there was a commonplace and brought its own harsh compensations to those who survived. Dead men drank no water, ate no food.

Already the women were stripping the dead for burial in shallow graves. But not Mitchell. Mitchell they left for the

jackals. It was not seemly that an infidel should lie with the faithful.

At the entrance to the tent Race said, 'Thou wilt eat with us today, thou and thy children?'

Bin Ghaba inclined his head in the careful etiquette of the desert. 'Aywah, shukkran. We will eat, ya Sidi.'

A woman brought water in a wooden bowl. The two men washed their hands, took off their burnouses and rinsed their heads. Race's nose was swollen now. He touched it lightly and felt the ends of the broken bone grate. He rinsed the taste of blood out of his mouth and spat politely into the sand.

When they had put on their burnouses, bin Ghaba said, 'There is a small matter of compensation for the death of my children.' He shrugged. 'We are not rich, ya Sidi, and our goats are few.'

Race forced his mind away from Mitchell. 'For each man, three goats.'

Bin Ghaba smiled. 'Life is cheap, but not that cheap, ya Sidi. Eight goats for each man. And shall we say two camels?'

An hour later they settled on three goats for each man dead and a camel between two. It was, of course, a game. A kind of verbal chess, leisurely, polite, for bin Ghaba enjoyable. A way of passing the time between friends. But Race, haunted by the mental image of Mitchell's headless trunk fountaining blood, was sickened by it and by the necessity to indulge the hard-eyed, thin-lipped desert pirate with the twisted smile. Disturbed by the events of the day, he suspected that bin Ghaba was playing for time, waiting for the daylight to die and night to come. But he was too weary to speculate on the reasons for this.

Presently, as the sun began to set, food was brought in and they ate together, Saar and bin Rashid grouped around their leaders. There was laughter and talk, as between brothers; a delicate membrane of friendship covering for a little space the enmity beneath the surface as the smooth cream floats on a bowl of goats' milk. And it was as if Mitchell had never

been, no Bedu bodies lay in shallow graves, no bin Rashid fighting men, alerted by the shots in the wadi that afternoon, moved now through the dark dunes, out-flanking the gorge where the sentries watched under the bright stars, infiltrating the wadi above the oasis where the narrow camel tracks wound down.

The Saar lay at ease in the tent, heavy with roast mutton, confident in their superior numbers and in the fact that the bin Rashid had eaten their food, taken their salt, were now in honour bound to respect their hospitality. Unaware that in the pure-bred eyes of Salim bin Ghaba, Abu Marak was of less account than a dog; not even a man, much less a Bedu, and therefore unprotected by Bedu custom.

13

A mile up the wadi the main force of the bin Rashid hobbled their camels and came down towards the tents on foot with the wind in their faces, drifting like shadows from rock-fall to rock-fall along the base of the northern dunes. It was dark now, a moonless night. Only the stars to give them light and the yellow glow of the dying cooking fires to guide them. From the great black tent of the sheik the sound of singing and laughter floated down to them. Hearing it, they nodded to each other in the starlight. This was how bin Ghaba had promised it would be. 'Marak will give us hospitality and then we will destroy him.'

They halted about a hundred yards west of the wells and squatted among the rocks where the shadows were blackest. Six of them stripped in the darkness and stood naked to have their bodies greased with goats butter. These were the men who would take out the sentries above the gorge. They went silently, armed only with knives. Sure-footed, cat-eyed. As they passed through the ranks hands touched them briefly, voices murmured, 'Go with God, go with God.'

They were back in twenty minutes, shivering slightly in the cold night air, their knives gritty with sand clinging to the congealing blood of their victims. They dressed quickly and picked up their rifles and bandoliers.

'The sentries are dead?' said the waiting men.

'Is it not so?' they answered, the desert phrase of accept-

ance for the miracle of birth and the logic of death. A man is born, a man dies. Is it not so?

A whisper began to grow among the bin Rashid. 'Kahm saah? Kahm saah?' Repeated and repeated like the sigh of the wind in the trees above the tents. 'Kahm saah, kahm saah?' Squatting among the rocks with their rifles held across their thighs, they swayed gently to the rhythm of the words. 'What time is it? What time? What time?' Each man asked his neighbour the ritual question, his breath warm on the face of the man beside him. And the whisper grew under the singing in the great tent where bin Ghaba sat among their enemies; grew under it, became a part of it; the susurration of a snare drum holding the music together. And gradually, inperceptibly, as the whisper grew so also did their excitement. 'Kahm saah, kahm saah?' Never more than a murmured sigh the question was yet possessed of such urgency that it moved them like a war chant. Now they were swaying from the hips, hissing the words, smiling at each other in the darkness. 'Kahmsaah, kahmsaah?' The two words run together now to make one, the rhythm quickening, spurring, inciting. 'What time, what time, what time?'

And then, abruptly, the singing stopped.

'When the singing stops,' bin Ghaba had said, 'then will it be time. Then shalt thou come to me my children.'

'Saah, saah, saah,' they whispered now. 'Time. It is time.'

Their question answered, they stood up and began to cross the open sand between themselves and the trees, silent on bare feet, skirting the wells, knowing the sentries were dead, that there was none to see them. In among the trees they grouped, circling the great tent. And their coming was no more than a broken pattern of shadows, as noiseless as the wheeling transit of the stars above the Wadi Dugri.

In the tent bin Ghaba was standing, facing Race across the square of carpet, smiling his twisted smile, looking over the heads of the Saar to the entrance. He was making his formal speech of gratitude for hospitality; all the flowery phrases,

the exaggerated compliments, the curiously oblique imagery beloved of the Bedu for whom talking was both communication and art form. His voice was strong and smooth, praising, soothing. Nor did it change in tone nor falter on a single syllable as he watched the two guards standing just inside the entrance slump soundlessly, knives in their backs, to be caught in the arms of their killers and lifted quietly out of the tent.

'. . . . and the name of Abu Marak, sheik of the Hadramaut, is it not held among us in honour?' bin Ghaba said and smiled mockingly at Race as the entrance of the tent was suddenly crowded with bin Rashid. 'We are but poor men, wanderers in the Empty Quarter, homeless, without roots. But thou hast received us with royal courtesy. Our beards shine with the fat of thy sheep, our mouths are sweet with the taste of thy meat.' He stooped slowly, his eyes on Race's face, and picked up his rifle with elaborate care, holding it at arms-length across his body. He took a pace forward and sank on one knee on the carpet in front of Race. 'May we in return give thee some small token of esteem?' he said, holding out the rifle. 'The poor gift of a poor man whose camels are slow and goats few.'

And as Race held out his hands to receive it, bin Ghaba sat back on his heel. And suddenly the rifle was at his hip, the barrel levelled at Race's chest. And he held Race's eyes with his as a cobra holds the eyes of its victim and called out in a loud voice, 'Come to me, my children. These dogs are thine for the taking.'

In an instant the walls of the tent were reduced to ribbons as the bin Rashid slashed their way in. The tent itself became a killing ground, a slaughterhouse. It was all swift and disciplined and utterly ruthless, executed brilliantly with a kind of Old Testament fervour. Not a battle, an extermination. Drowsy with food and fine words, the Saar were still staring in puzzled shock at the rifle which menaced their leader when the bin Rashid fell upon them, sliding the long, curved

knives up under their ribs and into their hearts in the classic Bedu killing thrust. It was all done with knives. No shot was fired, no word spoken. Four minutes it took. Four apocalyptic minutes of blood and treachery. And then it was over, the bin Rashid standing panting and bloody-handed, knee-deep in a pile of corpses that seemed to fill the tent leaving only a small carpeted space in the centre where Race sat like a stone and looked down the barrel of bin Ghaba's rifle.

'Thou wilt kill every man in the tent,' bin Ghaba had said, 'save only Marak. Marak we will give to the women.'

They tied Race's wrists, sat him against a tent pole and roped him, arms above his head, as they had roped Mitchell earlier that day. Race nodded at the rifle in bin Ghaba's hand. 'Why not shoot me now?' he said. 'Or art thou afraid to shoot a sheik of the Hadramaut?'

For answer, bin Ghaba put down his rifle, snatched the burnous off Race's head, seized him by the hair and tilted his face upwards. 'Thou art no sheik, Abu Marak,' he said. 'Thy hair is too short and thy skin too pale. Thou art not even a Bedu, as I and my children are Bedu. Thou art but a bastard of mixed blood; a dog from the gutters of Mirbat. Thou art not worth a bullet nor yet a knife.' He grinned down at Race. 'For thee it is the little stones when morning comes.'

Race felt the muscles of his stomach contract, tasted bile bitter in the sudden dryness of his throat. His broken nose was clogged with dried blood, swollen and tender. He swallowed hard and said, 'It is as I thought. Thou art afraid.'

'Afraid?' Bin Ghaba laughed. 'I am Salim bin Ghaba of the bin Rashid. I fear no man.'

'Words,' Race said. 'Empty words. Thou art a coward. A jackal that runs with the pack in the night, being afraid of the sun. A skulker in the shadows, treacherous, without honour. A defilement upon the face of the desert. Is it not so?' He felt the tension in the tent. Bin Ghaba's fingers tightened in his hair. He saw the Bedu's right hand close over the hilt of

his knife. 'I have seen he-goats with more courage than thou, bin Ghaba.'

Bin Ghaba's face set hard, the scar suddenly livid across his cheek, his eyes bright with anger.

'See,' Race said, 'even in anger thou art without spirit, lacking the will to silence me with a knife.' The muscles in his neck were lanced with pain as bin Ghaba forced his head back against the pole and thrust it down between his upstretched arms. He felt the sweat flooding his skin under his robe and stared up at that scarred face, forcing himself not to blink. 'Give thy knife to another,' he said, making his voice weary, uncaring. 'Surely among thy jackals there is one brave enough to strike a bound man?' He saw bin Ghaba's eyes flicker and tensed himself for the swift, merciful thrust of the knife.

There was a long moment of silence in the tent. The bin Rashid stood still, watching, waiting, sensing the struggle going on in bin Ghaba's mind. Then one of them spat and said, 'The yapping of a dog is an offence to men, is it not so? Cut out his tongue, ya Sidi, and let us have peace in the tent.'

The tautness went out of bin Ghaba's face. He smiled and shook his head. 'And rob the women of their pleasure?' he said. 'No, my children, we will not do that.' He released his grip on Race's hair. 'Thou art clever with words, Marak,' he said quietly, with a kind of grudging approval. 'But thou wilt find our women deaf to thy cunning.'

And Race closed his eyes, slumping in the ropes, knowing he had lost.

They dragged the corpses out of the tent and threw them into the wells. Men were sent up the wadi to bring down the camels, sentries posted above the gorge, the cooking fires stoked into new life. Unlike the Saar, the bin Rashid worked silently; disciplined, efficient, handling the dead bodies as unemotionally as butchers in an abattoir.

When the tent was cleared and the camels tethered in

readiness on the edge of the trees, bin Ghaba said, 'Now get the women, my children.'

The women were herded across the sand to the entrance of the tent and brought in a dozen at a time. Those who were old or obviously pregnant were knifed without ceremony and dragged out again. Those with young children had them snatched from their arms and thrown bodily out of the tent to be clubbed to death with rifle butts. Their screams rose like a descant of despair above the keening of the women, the excited, grunting laughter of the killers. The fires now became funeral pyres on which the bodies were stacked. The flames leaped high, glaring through the gaping holes in the tent walls. Oily black smoke heavy with the smell of roasting flesh drifted across the oasis.

The noise in the tent now was indescribable, the anguished weeping of the mothers matched by the hysteria of the young women selected for rape before dying. This was the Bedu system of over-kill; the primitive death rite which kept the population of the desert small enough for the oases to support; a kind of brutal catharsis in which death became the guarantee of life. Sick with horror, Race watched and listened, his mind beginning to break up under the pressure of information being fed into it. The terrible sights and sounds swept over him, swamping his senses. He felt himself being drawn into the manic blood-lust around him, becoming somehow a part of it, caught up in its cruel ecstasy, tainted with its guilt. His body shook in a fever of loathing as woman after woman, child after child was struck down and discarded. Vomit welled in his throat and gushed from his mouth, fouling his clothes. Overwhelmed, his brain closed up, shrinking protectively in upon itself, unable to absorb any more.

When only the young women were left alive the bin Rashid gathered in the tent to take their reward. This too was part of the rite, of the catharsis; an atavistic urge to balance the orgy of killing with an orgy of procreation. And once

again there was a kind of discipline in it, a laid-down pattern rigidly observed. The men divided into small groups, each taking one woman. She was stripped, hooked fingers ripping off her clothes, bloodied hands pawing her nakedness, passing her from man to man round the group. Then she was thrown down on the sandy floor of the tent, a rag of torn clothing stuffed into her mouth, her thighs forced open. She was raped by each member of the group in turn while the others watched and waited. When all the men had had her she was exchanged for a woman from another group. Finally, bruised and torn in mind as in body, she was knifed.

It had happened before and it would happen again. Race knew that; had many times seen the evidence of its happening in the polluted wells and piles of charred bones in a ravaged oasis. But to see it happening ....

He closed his eyes and sank into a kind of coma; a place of darkness and fear haunted by the horror surrounding him, spiked with the bitter foreknowledge of what the morning would bring. He was already a dead man, his life and mission destroyed. His training enabled him to accept that. He had made a mistake and must pay for it. The payment itself did not frighten him; only the manner in which it would be made.

Voices from yesterday spoke to him, disembodied in the darkness.

'It isn't going to work, y'know.' That was Blade, walking with him that night in the wadi. But even then it had begun to work, the signs favourable, the first small successes realised. And during the past two months he had seen a new confidence growing among the tribes, a new political stability emerging along the eastern border of the Yemen where the settled village culture of the farmers met the nomadic society of the Bedu. The damage caused by Marak and his Maaruf Saar, culminating in the destruction of the Mabkhaut and the brutal death of bin Hafid, was slowly being repaired. There was peace where there had been violence, the beginnings of

trust where there had been suspicion and terror. Until tonight.

'The DPG boys are doing a good job down there in the Hadramaut.' That was Maitland giving him his final briefing in Cairo when they had chosen Marak to be his alter ego. 'But at best it's only a holding action. The tribes are still uncommitted, fragmented, wide open to any wild-cat opportunist with a bit of muscle who's set on building himself a little empire. What we need now and in the immediate future is a sheik strong enough to unite them into a pro-British bloc which the Yemeni and the Iraqi will have to recognise. Somebody they can identify with. One of their own kind but politically aware, able to grasp the wider issues, introduce new ideas. It's not something we can impose on them from the outside. It's got to come from within, from among themselves.' He had smiled at Race; that deceptively mild, scholarly smile. 'Think you can do it for us?'

'If you can get me in there.' Race heard his own voice as it had been then, confident, determined.

'Oh, we can get you in. What we can't do is get you out again. At least, not in a hurry.'

But they had both known that if he had to get out it would be in a hurry. Because his cover was blown. Because something or someone had betrayed him.

Betrayal had always been on the cards; a built-in risk to which he had been alert, for which he had been meticulously prepared by Gill in the training Camp. Gill and his team who had stripped away the layers of his personality and reconstructed him as a Bedu sheik. When they had finished their work he spoke like a Bedu, ate, dressed, rode and used a knife like a Bedu, thought as a Bedu thought. The transformation had been in-depth and thorough. Appallingly thorough. But it had not been quite complete. He knew that now, as Gill had known it that night in the Miramar. Inside the carapace of his new character there was a soft centre, enduring, immutable. In spite of all they had done, emotionally he was still

himself. Tom Race, English-born, English-bred. And it was this basic, vital flaw which had betrayed him.

'Hullo, Sarge.' And that was the unwitting Judas voice of Mitchell. Mitchell whose haggard face swam at him now out of the darkness with accusing eyes, staring as he had stared that same morning with the halter round his neck. That had been the moment of betrayal; the instant of shocked surprise that had wrecked all Race's patient work among the tribes and would cost him his life. For it was then that the missing piece at the heart of his new personality had been exposed; then that his emotional reaction had been English, not Bedu.

He should have agreed with bin Ghaba, of course, seen Mitchell as being no more than a dog and given him to the women to kill. That was the custom, the laid-down procedure, what Marak would unhesitatingly have done. But he had been unable to do it. Betrayed by an innate respect for human life, by that soft centre Gill had been powerless to harden, his mind had stopped thinking like a Bedu and concentrated instead on desperate, useless schemes to save Mitchell's life or at least make the manner of his dying more merciful. A bullet in the head. The sort of clean, deadly knife-thrust he had given the Greek. It was the long drawn out, calculatedly cruel death at the hands of the women he could not countenance. And because he had been totally preoccupied with Mitchell he had been blind to the obvious implications of the arrival of the bin Rashid, failed to evaluate the threat posed by their presence in the wadi, allowed himself to be manoeuvred by bin Ghaba into a hopeless position from which only death could extricate him.

'Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.' The remembered words, an echo from his childhood, slid mockingly into his mind. He heard them with a kind of wistful despair, moved by their sanity, appalled by their irrelevance. In Bedu society mercy was weakness. And the weak went to the wall. Or, more precisely, to the women.

'You're not married?' Gill had said. Early in the piece, that had been. When he was still probing.

'No.'

'No – attachments?'

'No,' Race had said. 'Nobody.'

There had never been anybody. After the death of his aunt he had been alone, attractive to women, unmoved by them.

'You're not – ' Gill had hesitated.

'Queer?' Race had smiled. 'No.'

Gill had nodded, relieved. 'It's just that there's a fair amount of that sort of thing among the Bedu. Inevitable, of course, considering the life they lead. But it could raise problems if you were . . . .'

'Yes,' Race had said. 'But I'm not.' His disability, if that was what it was, lay in the area of friendship, not sex. He was a natural loner; self-contained, self-sufficient, needing nobody.

He remembered Blade's misgivings that night when they had struck their bargain together. Blade with his extrovert gregariousness, his little nurse in Cairo, his easy companionship with Finch and Hooper. Blade who had glimpsed the loneliness of one white man among the Bedu and been appalled. But it was that loneliness, that sense of being on his own without friends to make demands upon his emotions that had given Race strength and purpose; a kind of content.

Until Mitchell had come.

His mind plodded wearily through the maze of thoughts from which there was no escape, which brought him back always to Mitchell, the moment of weakness, of betrayal. He became aware of silence in the tent, of his senses insisting that he was alone. He dragged himself up out of the darkness within him and opened his eyes. The tent was empty. The pale sunlight of early morning filtered in through the ragged walls, mocking the guttering oil lamps, the stains of blood and vomit on the square of carpet where bin Ghaba had sat. He pulled on the rope that held him to the pole, easing the ache in his shoulders. He breathed in deeply, ignoring the bite of

the ropes round his chest and stomach, drew up his knees and kicked out his bound feet, flexing the muscles of his thighs, forcing his body to come alive, to be prepared. For what? he thought. Prepared for what? The women?

And there was a grim irony in the thought; that he who had never loved nor needed to be loved should come, at the end, to die at the hands of women.

He heard the bleating of goats, laughter, the murmur of voices, and turned his head towards the entrance of the tent and saw the women come in.

There were six of them; divorcees, cast off by their husbands, wanted by no man. Homeless, without possessions of any kind, they followed in the wake of the raiders, herding the stolen goats, lying up against them for warmth in the cold desert nights, drinking their milk to stay alive. Their clothes were ragged and filthy, their bare feet calloused, their bodies encrusted with dirt. They wore no silver anklets, no dowry coins stitched to their yashmaks. They were thin and withered, crawling with lice, scabby. And they stank of goat.

They squatted in front of Race, shapeless in their long black dresses. Above their yashmaks their eyes were bright with curiosity; the unhealthy curiosity of children who pull the wings off flies.

'He is young,' one of them said.

'And strong.' They giggled together, a high-pitched cackling like the sound of vultures on a kill.

One reached inside her dress and brought out a knife. She stood up, moved to one side avoiding Race's feet, stooped quickly and cut down through his robe, opening it from neck to hem. The cloth fell away and exposed his nakedness. The women looked at his body greedily, their curiosity spiced now with sexual frustration; the bitter, cruel lust of women unwanted and despised.

'Wallahi,' the woman with the knife said. 'He is uncircumcised.'

They looked at each other, giggling happily. One of them

stood, pulled up her dress and took off her baggy drawers. Drawers worn only by women. And boys dressed for public circumcision.

They cut through the rope that held his ankles together and he lashed out at them with his feet. Two of the women seized his legs, lifting his hips so that they could slide the drawers up over his thighs and tie them round his waist. His skin crawled under the filthy garment. The women's hands were all over him now as they crouched round him stroking his hair, touching his broken nose, pinching his chest and stomach, feeling between his legs. He choked in disgust on the smell of goat and ancient body-dirt. But his loathing acted as a kind of stimulant. He flexed his muscles to break the iron grip of the cramp that knotted them. The strength began to flow back into his legs. His brain cleared and steadied. His eyes watched the woman with the knife.

Stooping over him she cut the ropes across his body. The knife nicked him each time, drawing a little blood. The blood excited the women. They rubbed their fingers in it and sucked them, giggling with pleasure. The cuts were small and superficial but they stung Race like spurs. As the woman with the knife reached up to cut the rope that held his wrists to the tent pole he arched his back and braced his feet on the sand. When the rope parted he lunged. His tied hands closed over the knife and wrenched it out of her grip. He jerked himself sideways, butting her legs with his shoulder. She stepped back, surprised, off-balance, bent forward from the waist. Her head was just above his and he brought the knife down hard, plunging it into the side of her neck. There was a great gush of blood and she fell forward on top of the other women. Race jerked up his knees, set his feet firmly and stood up, kicking the women away, half-jumping, half-stumbling away from the pole on to the square of carpet. He turned, crouching a little, his lips drawn back in a grimace of effort.

Huddled on the sand, shocked by the swiftness of his action, the women reached out skinny arms like snakes

towards him. He slashed down at them with the knife and they drew back, hissing in anger and fear. He waded in among them kicking and slashing, feeling their bodies bony under his feet. They cowered against each other, arms raised to protect themselves, whimpering now, their victim turned aggressor. He kicked sand in their faces, turned his back on them and ran to the entrance of the tent.

Outside, the bin Rashid were sitting in a great circle round a stake that had been driven upright into the ground between the trees and the mouth of the gorge. They were laughing and talking together like a theatre audience waiting for the curtain to go up. But their laughter died when they saw Race come out of the tent alone and run up through the trees towards them. He was a strange, savage figure in the woman's drawers and the torn robe. His bound hands were held chest-high in front of him like the arms of a praying mantis and there was madness in his eyes and he shouted as he ran, a hoarse, wordless bellow of anger and hatred. They saw the blood on his hands and body and glistening on the knife blade; saw and heard and reached for their rifles, knowing that this was the apparition of death.

'Don't shoot,' bin Ghaba yelled. 'I want him alive.'

Race's brain homed on the voice like a magnetic needle. It was bin Ghaba he wanted; the scarred, smiling face framed in the striped burnous. The others in the circle were only a blur of colour in the white light of the morning. Bin Ghaba alone was in focus, twice life-size, a target painted on the sky.

Up the slope Race came, leaping over the seated men into the circle, the knife raised high now above his head, his eyes fixed on bin Ghaba's face. Hands reached up to grab him but he kicked them contemptuously away. He was quick and strong, pumped full of adrenalin, one man alone, unencumbered, with murder in his heart. It was as if all the lonely years, all the ruthless, dedicated training, the self-denial, the single-minded concentration, the deliberate suppression of emotion had come together, bonded into the shaft of a spear.

And he himself, dressed in women's clothing, tattered and bloody, with everything behind him and nothing to look forward to – he himself, neither English soldier nor Bedu tribesman but just Tom Race the man, the sharp, pointed head of the spear.

Across the sand past the waiting stake, the twisted mouth sneering, the dark, watchful eyes steady, without fear, drawing him on, taunting him. The ground seemed to tilt steeply under his feet as if he were running up the side of a mountain. The face of bin Ghaba filled the sky, a dark planet poised above him. And the spear flying straight and true, on target, unstoppable. His lungs were bursting, his mouth wide open, the shout of despair and triumph gargling in his throat.

Gargling and sobbing and abruptly silenced as a rifle butt slammed into his ribs under his right arm and chopped him down. He rolled twice and lay panting on his back, struggling to reverse the knife in his bound hands, to turn the point against himself, drive it down deep into his own body, cheat the women with their smiling, empty eyes and their filthy hands and the stones. The little cruel stones.

But as his mind had failed him over Mitchell so now his hands betrayed him. His fingers were stiff and clumsy, the knife suddenly heavy, awkward, slippery with blood. He fumbled and dropped it, turned his head desperately, saw a booted foot cover the blade and looked up into bin Ghaba's face.

'Thou art a fool, Abu Marak,' bin Ghaba said without pity. 'Is it not written that thou art for the women?'

14

The stake was short, shaped like a T. Not an impaling stake; a stake for the stones.

They forced Race to kneel on the sand, thighs apart, his back against the wooden T. He struggled wildly, butting with his head, biting, kicking. It took four men to get him down and hold him in position. They tore away the tattered remains of his robe but left him the woman's drawers. Bedu men are obsessively modest and dislike nakedness. The women are less inhibited.

When they had him kneeling they cut his wrists free, spread his arms wide and bent them back over the cross-piece of the stake, roping his hands securely behind him to the upright. Trussed and helpless, he was incapable of further resistance, able to move only his head. They left him then, alone in the centre of the circle, and went back to their places walking slowly and in silence.

Even in his fear Race recognised the almost liturgical quality of their movements; the rhythm of a set-piece killing which once put in motion could not be halted. He looked round the ritualistic circle enclosing him and saw it to be part of an ordered, pre-ordained pattern designed to transfuse a symbolic, even a religious, meaning into an act of barbarous cruelty. He realised that he was involved in an ancient ceremony rooted in the primitive rites of human sacrifice endemic in Bedu society, reaching back beyond Abraham; rites carefully created to destroy a man in spirit and mind as

well as in body, extolling by his degradation and suffering the voracious omnipotence of an angry God. The deliberately undignified, animal-like position of the victim on the stake; the shame of a woman's intimate undergarment mocking his sex; the brooding, watching circle of his peers. All this gave an esoteric significance to the brutal manner of his death. So had the Inquisition of Spain used the heretic's saffron gown and the chanted prayers of the priests to sanctify the calculated cruelty of the auto-da-fé.

Perhaps for a Bedu the ritual of the stake and the circle would work, transcending the horror, the terror, the unimaginable agony. Victim and watchers alike caught up in the mystique and ecstasy of sacrifice. Perhaps there was even an element of mercy in the almost clinical rites of preparation. A drug to soothe and exalt the spirit while the body was being systematically destroyed.

Race shook his head impatiently, aware of the numbness in his hands, the stricture of cramp in knees and thighs and shoulders. Whatever it might do for a Bedu, the ritual did nothing for him.

Opposite him, facing him across the sand, bin Ghaba sat with his rifle in his hands. He patted the barrel affectionately, his eyes holding Race's. 'Behold thy friend, Marak,' he said, lifting the rifle so that the round eye of the muzzle looked directly at Race's face. The circle of men sat silent, listening to his words. 'Thy friend, thine only friend. In an hour or two thou wilt need him and the mercy he alone can give. Thine eyes will plead with him to take thy life and give thee peace. But alas, thy friend is blind and will not . . .'

'I don't need friends.' Race's voice was loud, surprisingly steady, the English words cutting through bin Ghaba's flow of Arabic. 'I am myself.' It was a declaration of identity; three words spoken in his mother tongue that were both creed and consummation. He saw the flicker of doubt in bin Ghaba's eyes. 'Ana mus Bedu, mus Marak,' he said. And in

English, flatly, but with a certain pride, 'I am Major Thomas Race.'

A murmur rippled round the circle. Bin Ghaba silenced in with his hand. 'Ingleez?' he said, puzzled. 'Thou art Ingleez?'

'Yes.'

Bin Ghaba stared at him, assessing him. The black hair curling behind his ears, the deeply-tanned skin, the bold, gipsy eyes. Not a Bedu, certainly. Not desert born and desert bred as the bin Rashid were. But English? He said, 'And Marak?' Marak was not a Bedu either. But at least he was an Arab.

'Marak is dead,' Race said in Arabic so that they could all hear and understand. 'As thou wilt be, thou and thy people, if I die today.' It was, of course, an empty threat. He knew that even before he saw the contempt in bin Ghaba's smile. The ritual had begun and must proceed to its climax. Bedu or Englishman, the victim was on the stake, the sacrifice prepared. Nothing could stop that.

Bin Ghaba shrugged. 'All men must die. Is it not so written? Death is nothing, Ingleez. To greet it as a man is all.'

The women were coming up the slope from the tent now; a small procession, walking in single file behind the leader who held her skirt out in front of her full of small stones. Race heard the soft slur of their feet on the loose sand, saw the heads of the men in the circle turn to watch them. He stiffened instinctively, bracing himself on the stake.

'As a man, Ingleez,' bin Ghaba said quietly.

The women squatted by the stake, settling like carrion crows in their black dresses. Two on his left, two on his right and one behind him. Bird-bright, bird-hard, their eyes searched his face for signs of fear as they sorted through the pile of stones they had brought; small, smooth stones the size of birds' eggs but harder, heavier. They had brought a knife, too, and a goatskin water bag. They arranged these tidily on the sand by the stone like acolytes dressing an altar.

Race watched them, compressing his lips, his eyes bleak.

But behind the impassive mask of his face his brain was taking panic action; withdrawing into itself, deliberately blanking-off the main nerve ganglia, rejecting the urgent alarm warnings transmitted by his eyes, burrowing down into a secret fortified cell beyond the reach of his senses, the ultimate I AM which men call the soul. His head drooped a little between his hunched shoulders. His eyes stared unseeing at the clawed hands sifting the stones. His whole being was turned inwards now, concentrated on one elemental truth. 'I am myself.' The unspoken words stamped themselves on the walls of that inner mental strongroom spelling out both defiance and reassurance. Whatever the women did to his body, however grievously pain eroded his mind, this would remain unshaken, inviolate. 'I am myself.'

Strong, bony fingers twisted themselves firmly into his hair and jerked his head back sharply. He closed his eyes against the brightness of the sky and the darkness within was a promise of strength. Hands gripped his jaw, fingers tore open his mouth, prised his teeth apart, reached in and seized his tongue. The knife hacked it out and his teeth snapped together in agony and his mouth was full of blood. The iron hilt of the knife slammed into his jaw and smashed it. His mouth fell open, spewing blood.

The women sighed, murmuring together, hovering over him. They trickled water from the bag into his mouth, watching his throat working as he swallowed it. And the first of the little stones dropped down past the stump of his tongue and into his gullet. It felt huge, like a boulder, and the women stroked his neck gently, skilfully, easing the stone down into his stomach. And dropped in another one . . .

Three hours later he was still alive, slipping in and out of consciousness in a red haze of pain like a hesitant spirit crossing and re-crossing the threshold of death. He was heavy with stones and water, streaming with sweat, his throat shredded and bleeding. His bloated stomach sagged in the supporting drawers, bulging grotesquely under the coarse,

tightly-stretched cotton, swelling like a monstrous internal growth over his spread thighs. The women had removed their yashmaks and were breathing quickly, excitedly, as if sexually aroused, as if they were engaged in a kind of rape. His eyes were open now, protruding a little as he struggled to breathe. The women's faces, naked and withered, floated uncertainly above his upturned face. A slimy slick of blood and mucus and water oozed over his beard and spread across his chest. He was no longer a man, only a hideous bag of swollen flesh tied to the stake on the urine-soaked sand. But in the secret cell of his mind the words still made their terse affirmation. 'I am myself.'

The women worked on him with a kind of dreadful patience. Their movements were slow, ritualistic. It was their special skill to keep him alive even as they were methodically killing him. There was a curious, horrifying tenderness about the way they fed him the stones and water. It was as though they were black-robed nuns engaged in administering a perverted eucharist.

The men in the circle sat silent, drugged by the spectacle of his suffering, caught up in its horror. In a primitive, brutal way cleansed and renewed by it, their fears and hatred drawn out of them, transferred through the stones to his body. He was, for them, the sin-eater, the sacrifice dying to give them new life .....

Shortly before noon the women sensed he was coming to the threshold for the last time. He was coughing up his stomach lining now and haemorrhaging internally. They began to croon a high, thin dirge which was taken up by the deep voices of the watching men; part lament, part sacrificial hymn, it was strangely moving, touched with tears and remorse. In its own way beautiful.

And it was this that set Race free. The wordless keening seeped down through countless layers of pain into that small cell in the core of his being which was his last contact with sanity, penetrating where the agony of the stones had failed

to break through, invading his ultimate personality with the mercy of death. 'Let go, let go,' the music murmured, gentle, forgiving. 'Sleep. Sleep now. Sleep.' Disarmed by its tenderness he released the grip of his will, opened the floodgates and let the music drown him. His pulse hesitated, returned, hesitated again. The muscles in his chest laboured wearily to suck in air. His eyes began to roll.

Still singing, the women turned their heads and looked towards bin Ghaba. Their faces were composed now, the tensions of lust and cruelty washed away. Bin Ghaba rose and walked across the sand to stand among them, an eagle among the crows. He looked down at what they had done to Race. His eyes were empty of both hatred and compassion. After a moment he nodded.

One of the women picked up the knife and severed the string of the drawers. The coarse material, stretched skin-tight, split down the front. The enormous bulge of Race's distended stomach, heavy with stones, flopped over his thighs and sagged between his knees. His gut ruptured under the weight in one last, blinding stab of pain. The singing stopped on a shrill shriek of triumph and release. And it was over.

Bin Ghaba looked down at the ravaged face, the lolling. lifeless head. 'Cut him free and wrap him,' he said.

The woman behind the stake stood up. Her hands were sticky with blood and mucus. She wiped them on her dress. 'Wrap him?'

'For burial.'

The woman said, surprised, 'But he is jackal meat.' The rite demanded that. The bloated carcase of the victim left for the jackals to fight over and devour until nothing remained but the bones. Only so would the sacrifice be complete, the ceremonial cleansing of the tribe accomplished. 'It is not the custom, ya Sidi,' she said, 'to bury . . . .'

'Do not presume to teach me the custom.' Bin Ghaba's voice was sharp. 'This one is not for the jackals. This one was a man and will go home to his people.' The woman was old,

ugly, her mouth shrunk over toothless gums. He looked at her with distaste. 'In the name of God veil thyself, woman,' he said. 'And wrap him for his grave.'

For while there is no mercy in the desert nor any place for weakness, courage is recognised among the Bedu, prized even in a foreigner. And where there is courage it is right that there should also be honour.

Death is nothing. To greet it as a man is all.

'You're quite sure, sar'nt?' Rhys-Smith said.

'Quite sure, sir. That's Tom Race.'

'Who was with you on CATCHER?'

'Who was killed on CATCHER,' Finch said, stressing the verb. 'Yes, sir.'

'Four months ago.'

'Sir.'

'Hmm.' Rhys-Smith turned to look at the SWO. 'Mr Lockyer? Any thoughts?'

Lockyer shrugged. 'He's been badly mauled. And there's the beard, of course.' He shook his head. 'I didn't know him well enough to be able to put a name on him now.'

'Nor I,' Gold said. 'But if Race died last August, this isn't him.'

Rhys-Smith said, 'There isn't any way they could've preserved . . . ?'

'No.'

Finch looked down at the swollen abdomen sagging over the thighs. 'There is just one thing, sir.'

'Yes?' Rhys-Smith said.

'Race picked up a bullet on CATCHER. Flesh wound in the left thigh. High up. There'll be a scar.'

Rhys-Smith said, 'If you wouldn't mind, Doc.'

Gold leaned over the table, manipulating the great bag of flesh, feeling the movement of the stones under the stretched skin. He eased the mass to one side and exposed the left thigh.

A long puckered scar ran up towards the groin. Finch's eyes said, I told you so.

Rhys-Smith sighed. 'That's it, then. Thanks, Doc.'

Gold covered the body with a blanket and stripped off his rubber gloves.

Rhys-Smith wrinkled his nose. 'God, this place stinks. Let's get some air, shall we?'

They went out of the tent. Dawn was streaking the sky, the stars fading in the east. The air was cold and clean, deliciously sweet. They gulped it gratefully.

Lockyer said, 'About the funeral, sir. I'll get it laid on for later this morning. I take it you'll want the . . . .'

'No,' Rhys-Smith said. 'No funeral. Not today.'

Gold said quickly, 'I don't advise any delay. The sooner we . . . .'

As if he had not spoken, Rhys-Smith said, 'Flight Lieutenant Blade – he's out with G George, isn't he?'

'Flight Lieutenant Blade?' Lockyer sounded puzzled. 'Yes. Yes, he is.'

'When're they due in?'

'Some time this evening.'

'On schedule, are they?'

'Sir.'

Rhys-Smith nodded. 'Good.' He turned to face Gold. 'I want that body kept. Pack him in ice or whatever the drill is. Just till tomorrow afternoon. OK?'

Gold shook his head. 'I can't do that, I'm afraid. He's too far gone. Only those strips of cloth holding him together. Now we've cut those . . . . In any case, I don't have the necessary mortuary facilities.'

'Your problem, Doc. You'll think of something.'

Gold's eyebrows rose. 'Thanks for the compliment but it's not on. You don't leave a decomposing corpse lying about in a tented camp. Not in this climate. Especially when it's four days old and fly-blown. The health of this unit is my responsibility and I'm not prepared to risk . . . .'

Rhys-Smith's face tightened. 'I want him kept for Blade to see. That's an order, Doc. You can have it in writing if you want.'

Gold hesitated. 'With respect, sir,' he said formally, 'if it's a question of identification Sergeant Finch has already . . . .'

'I know.'

'But you think he's wrong?'

'I think he's right, actually.'

'But that's not enough?'

'For me it is, yes,' Rhys-Smith said. In his view CATCHER had been both ill-advised and unnecessary; the sort of half-cocked, panic operation the cloak-and-dagger boys periodically came up with to justify their existence. His impulse now was to bury Race and close the file, grateful to have lost only one man, and to hell with the loose ends and unanswered questions. But his instinct warned him to be careful. The file, if there was one, was not in his Orderly Room. It was in HQME, Cairo with several yards of red tape tied round it. 'It's Maitland who won't wear it.'

'Maitland?' Gold said, surprised. 'You mean that Intelligence egghead from GHQ?'

Rhys-Smith nodded. 'CATCHER was Blade's show. Maitland'll want him to identify that poor devil in there. And he'll want to check for himself.' He smiled briefly at Finch. 'No offence, sar'nt. S.O.P. and all that bull.'

'Sir,' Finch said stiffly. And added, 'But it is Race. The Skipper – I mean Flight Lieutenant Blade – he'll tell you the same.'

'I'm sure he will.' Rhys-Smith's good eye looked at Lockyer. 'I want to see him the minute he gets back. Off the truck and into my office, jildi. Meanwhile, I don't want this talked about. Right?'

'Right, sir,' Lockyer said. 'If there's nothing else . . . . ?'

'Carry on, Mr Lockyer. You too, sar'nt.'

Watching them walk away, Gold said, 'Standard Opera-

tional Procedure my arse. Since when've you been a belt-and-braces man?'

Rhys-Smith grinned. 'Don't panic, Doc. I'll signal Cairo before breakfast. With any luck Maitland'll be here tonight. You'll get your funeral tomorrow.'

'Maitland, Maitland,' Gold said. 'Why is it always Maitland? Where does he come into this?'

'I don't know,' Rhys-Smith said grimly. 'But I'm sure as hell going to find out.'

PHILIP FRIEDMAN

TERMINATION ORDER

Gregory Moore, faithful servant of the CIA, had just finessed the coup of the decade. He had turned an important Russian into an agent for the US. Then abruptly, in the wake of a vicious CIA witch-hunt, his mission was terminated, ordered to close down. Refusing to be phased out, determined to protect both his contact and his colleagues, Moore was suddenly caught in a savage crossfire. Solitary, hunted, fleeing from the twisted streets of Vienna to the deserted coast of Maryland, he would traverse a labyrinth of deceit and illusion where every friend was a potential enemy . . . every ally a possible foe . . . where no one could be trusted – not even the highest command.

CORONET BOOKS

ALSO AVAILABLE FROM CORONET BOOKS

	JOHN GARDNER	
☐ 22820 2	The Werewolf Trace	£1.10
☐ 24504 2	The Dancing Dodo	£1.40
☐ 25858 6	The Nostradamus Traitor	£1.25
☐ 27107 8	The Garden of Weapons	£1.75
	TERENCE STRONG	
☐ 27908 7	Whisper Who Dares	£1.60
	PHILIP FRIEDMAN	
☐ 27545 6	Termination Order	£1.50
	RALPH DENNIS	
☐ 26670 8	MacTaggart's War	£1.50
	JAMES FOLLETT	
☐ 26674 0	Churchill's Gold	£1.25

All these books are available at your local bookshop or newsagent, or can be ordered direct from the publisher. Just tick the titles you want and fill in the form below.

Prices and availability subject to change without notice.

CORONET BOOKS, P.O. Box 11, Falmouth, Cornwall.

Please send cheque or postal order, and allow the following for postage and packing:

U.K. – 40p for one book, plus 18p for the second book, and 13p for each additional book ordered up to a £1.49 maximum.

B.F.P.O. and EIRE – 40p for the first book, plus 18p for the second book, and 13p per copy for the next 7 books, 7p per book thereafter.

OTHER OVERSEAS CUSTOMERS – 60p for the first book, plus 18p per copy for each additional book.

Name .....

Address .....

.....

Something was brewing in the Empty Quarter of Saudi Arabia. Something Military Intelligence in Cairo wanted to pin-point and contain. Something to do with Abu Marak, a renegade sheik who was terrorising the Bedu tribes and whose actions threatened the security of the Middle East. And it was up to four men from the RAF Desert Patrol Group to sort out the mess. For three of them it was to be a straightforward, if dangerous, mission. But for Sergeant Tom Race it was something much more ...

Here is a microcosm of war: its horror, its sacrifice and a moving climax which you will never forget.

"A tremendously thrilling tale"
MANCHESTER EVENING NEWS

CORONET BOOKS
Fiction
Adventure and Suspense

ISBN 0-340-27919-2

90150

9 780340 279199

UNITED KINGDOM £1.50